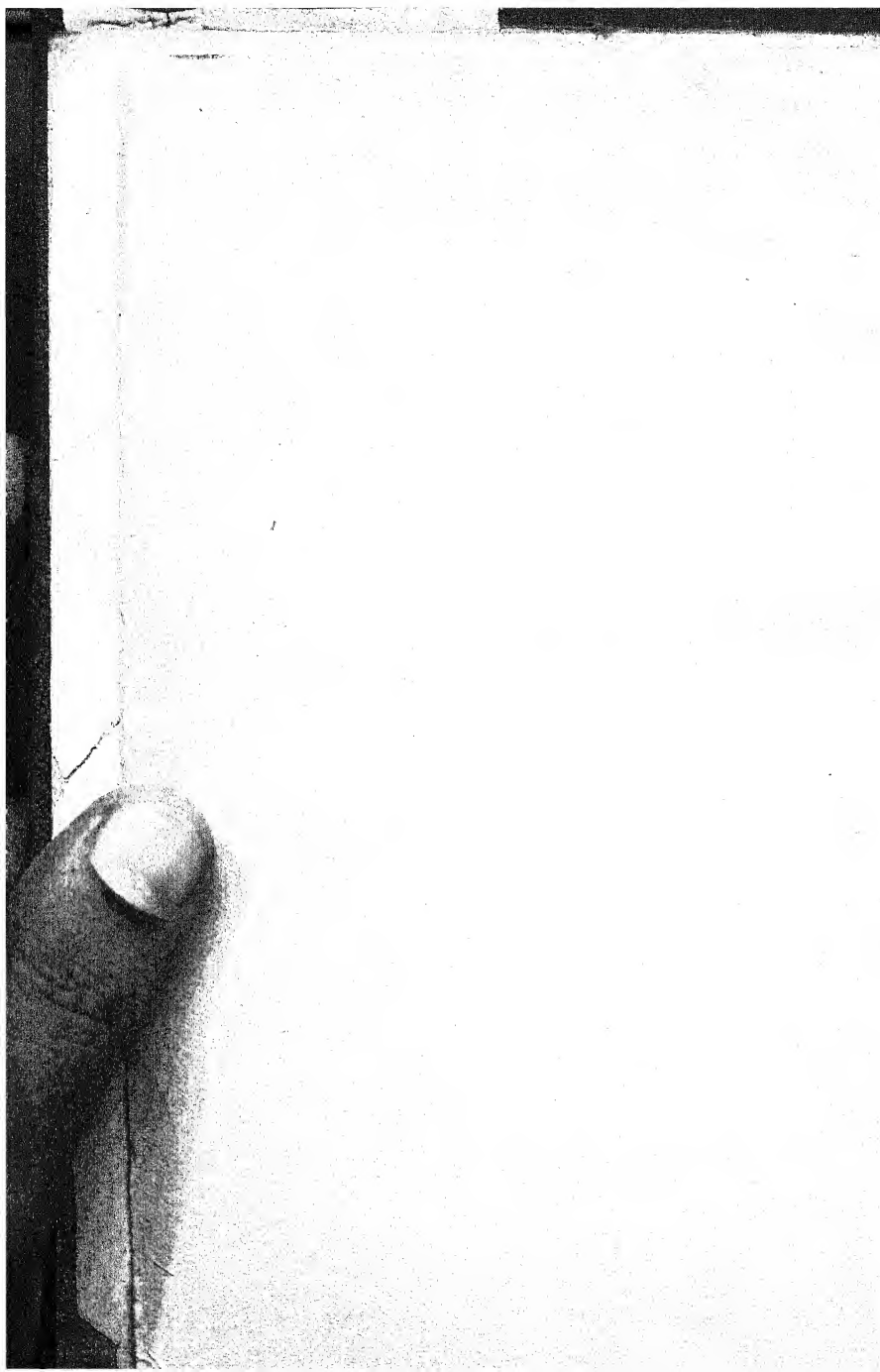


Lismoyle





LISMOYLE:

An Experiment in Ireland

By

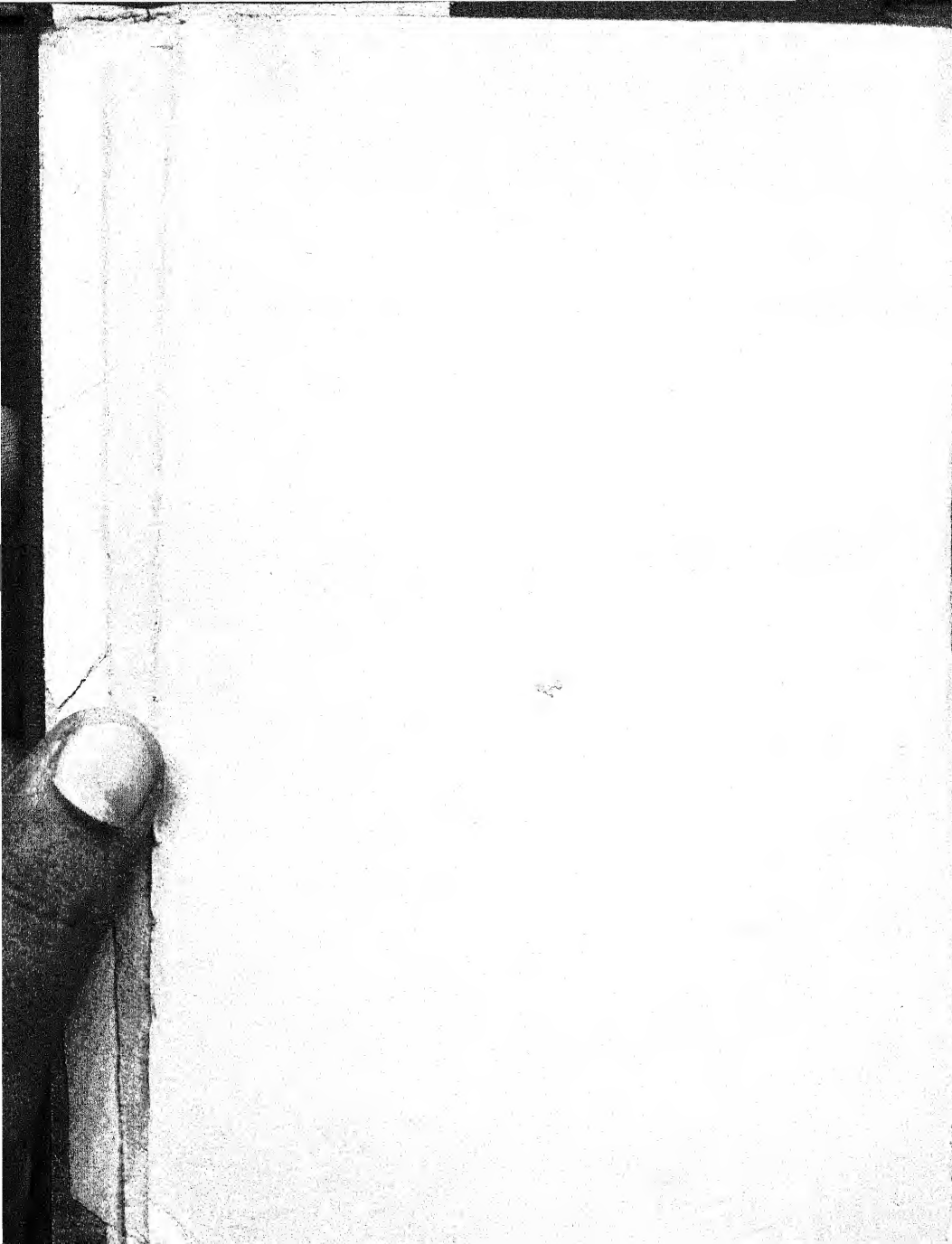
B. M. Croker

*Author of "Terence," "Her Own People," "The
Company's Servant," "In Old Madras," etc.*

*"It may be that the gulfs will wash us down.
It may be we shall touch the happy isles."*

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LISMOYLE

CHAPTER I

I N the back drawing-room of a stately "Adams" mansion in Grosvenor Street, a lady with abundant grey hair, and a fashionably slim figure, was seated before a Louis Seize secretaire, engrossed in her correspondence. The Honourable Charlotte Kyle, mistress of the establishment, was also that notably detached, and independent individual, a wealthy, childless widow; one who loved travel, excitement, change; and at fifty, was filled with a burning desire to get the most out of life, before the stern reality of passing years, overtook and claimed her.

She had taste—as the apartment testified, in a delightful combination of old French furniture, notable water-colours, and priceless china; energy, was indicated by a bold hand and flying stylographic pen. To her sense of method and order, an admirably tidy writing-table bore witness. Besides the usual paraphernalia, observe a neat pile of addressed and

stamped letters, an open engagement-book, a diary, a stack of guide books, a folding map, and a sheaf of receipted bills—docketed and arranged, as if by rule of thumb.

Although infected by the restlessness of the age, and joining in the nerve-wrecking pace of modern times, Mrs. Kyle was also one of the most methodical and careful of women ; a lady, who never shopped, or paid calls, minus *a list* ; who made her arrangements for visits and guests, months in advance ; thought out her Christmas presents in July ; her autumn dates at Easter. Her plans, finally matured, became as fixed and irrevocable as the laws of the Medes and Persians. However, within the last week, a long cherished and carefully organized programme had been rudely upset, and its disappointed author was now engaged in pouring out her lamentations to one of her most intimate friends.

“ You know my itinerary was carefully elaborated for our trip round the world ; a party of six—Colonel and Mrs. Marshall, Lady Florence Greves, Professor Northwood, Rhoda and myself—just a railway-carriage full of congenial spirits, to start September 1st, —after I had done Aix—for Colombo, Burma, Singapore, Java, China, Japan, California, Canada, New York, and home by May. Berths and seats had been secured, tickets taken, preparations complete, when one of the precious half-dozen has dropped out, and of all people, Rhoda ! Lately, she has been rather pale and fagged, and complained that she could not

sleep or drag herself about so, I called in Doctor Ambrose—the celebrated specialist in phthisis, and our old friend; he examined her chest and heart, and has positively forbidden the journey. This is a frightful disappointment to me. Rhoda takes the verdict philosophically, and actually confesses that she rather jibs at the expedition. Of course, we have had a strenuous season, and the girl is worn out; but although I have suggested, that she will get lots of rest in the trains, and steamers, Doctor Ambrose is adamant, so I have written to offer the vacant place to Constance Bruce, who will snatch at the chance.

“For my own part, I shall be lost without Rhoda; such a bright, useful fellow-traveller, and comrade; we are more like sisters than aunt and niece—even though I am double her age.

“And now the question is—what is to become of her whilst I am absent for six whole months? The house (with servants) is let to some dear old friends, who will look after the parrot, and keep everything, so to speak, in cotton-wool. I cannot remain behind, desert my ‘personally-conducted tour,’ and throw over the Marshalls, and Flo. Dorothy Darcy is dying to have Rhoda—you know, they were school-fellows. But I say ‘No’ (tactfully, of course). Dolly is a pretty, flighty girl, with an elderly husband, and many admirers, and I don’t wish Rhoda to play propriety, or perhaps be dragged into some nasty scandal. Then Lady Vydon would gladly chaperon her—and she is a delightful old dear—but Algy, her

son, who lives with her, is a serious drawback ; an idle, extravagant man-about-town, hard-up, and prowling round for an heiress. Thank goodness, there is no fear of Rhoda losing her head over his Satanic good looks and admirable dancing. I doubt if she will ever settle ! She is so *difficile*, has such keen intuition ; sees people's weak side first, and is desperately afraid of being married for her money. To tell you the truth, Rhoda rather scares men : she has a way of laughing at them, that they don't half like ; and everyone knows she is a merciless mimic. All the same, the girl has had many proposals. She refused Lord Finsbury again this season ; I admit, that he is plain, and rather stupid, but a good, honest fellow, with a fine old estate, and a long pedigree. In his sight, Rhoda stands on a pedestal ; he merely gazes, grovels, and adores. To watch his face, when she is dancing or laughing and chattering, reminds one of the devout worship of some faithful dog !

" But I am wandering from the question—what is to be done with my niece ? Her own idea is to go to Ireland, and I need not tell you that I am opposing this crazy notion, tooth and nail.

" Now for a little bit of family history. Rhoda's mother was Irish. Cecil Kyle, my husband's only brother, was a remarkably handsome, popular young officer in the Twenty-fifth Lancers, and his father's favourite. When he was quartered in Ireland, he fell in love with a pretty, penniless girl of nineteen,

but Mr. Kyle, senior, would not hear of the match. He was an ambitious, fiery old gentleman, who had other plans: and when his son married without parental consent, he cut off his liberal allowance, and Cecil was obliged to exchange, and go to India. The girl-wife died when Rhoda was born, and when, six months later, Cecil was killed, the poor little orphan was brought home by a jet-black ayah, and adopted by the remorseful old man, who—if he was hard on her parents—indulged her disgracefully. Herbert and I having no children, she succeeds to a large fortune, and—when I cease to continue—to all I possess. Quite recently Rhoda has written to her only relative on her mother's side: a certain Mrs. Conroy, who is only too ready and eager to receive her, and offers a hearty Irish welcome,—which Rhoda is clamouring to accept. Personally, I have never set foot on the Green Island, but I have an idea that it is damp, unsettled, and in some ways uncivilized. I feel sure my dainty, delicate niece would be utterly miserable and out of her element. The South of France, or Switzerland would be a thousand times better. I pin my hopes on——”

At this moment the door opened, and a tall footman announced: “Doctor Ambrose.”

“I was actually about to write your name!” said Mrs. Kyle, rising and turning to receive a well set-up, frock-coated, elderly man, with a noble head, set upon a pair of very square shoulders.

"I am flattered," he answered, with a smile. "Honourable mention, I trust?"

"It was about Rhoda. Do come and sit down," leading the way towards a settee and arm-chairs. "Isn't this heat broiling?" and Mrs. Kyle took up a paper, and began to fan herself.

"Yes, the sooner you are all out of the town the better," he answered decisively.

"I can't stir before Monday week. I have a dinner-party, a luncheon, and am engaged every hour. My book of appointments, is as full as your own!"

"And what about Rhoda?"

"Nothing is settled. She's bent upon visiting this aunt, and it's all pure contrariness. That's one of her little faults. If I had only suggested Ireland—oh, how I wish I had! she would have screamed at the idea. But unfortunately I said that it was quite the last country in the world to suit her, and she, figuratively speaking, started at once. She has made up her mind to explore for herself, and no one in the whole world can stop her—but—" she raised and pointed a taper finger—"you."

"And what will you say to me, if I do not propose to prevent her?"

Mrs. Kyle made no audible reply, but her face was expressive.

"I believe the change will do Rhoda no end of good. Country air, good fresh milk, early hours, an out-of-door life, will be the making of

her. This incessant whirl of society is killing the girl."

"But why?" demanded her aunt. "Look at me!"

He gave a quick glance at a thin, well-preserved, still handsome matron; a woman hard as nails, and without a nerve in her body.

"Yes, you have a splendid constitution; she a poor one. Her vitality and spirits have carried her along so far, but are now nearly exhausted. She has a sluggish heart; her lungs are none of the best. Another turn of the social wheel, and she will be a confirmed invalid. What she requires is an absolute rest, and change. Let her, so to speak, have her shoes off, and be turned out to grass—in Ireland."

"But Rhoda is not the sort of girl to rough it, and be satisfied to live on porridge, and potatoes, and witty remarks."

"Of course not. I take it for granted that her aunt is a woman of some position. What do you know about her?"

"Very little. I believe she married Captain Sangster, who died; and then she married a widower, a Mr. Conroy, with a fine old family place. Now she is again a widow, and has two or three grown-up children. They live somewhere in the South, near a town called Kilbeggan, and that is positively everything I can tell about them," she concluded, with easy vagueness.

"Well, I daresay it will be all right," said Dr.

Ambrose. "Rhoda is a clever and adaptable young woman."

"Somehow I can't see her in Ireland! And she's not what I call an outdoor girl! Of course she rides, and plays golf; but dancing, theatricals, music, and bridge, are more in her line." Then as if seized by sudden apprehension, opening her eyes very wide, she added:

"Think of the Irish fortune-hunters! Irishmen are proverbially good-looking, and attractive."

"A young lady who has escaped unscorched through five London seasons, and travelled in many lands, is not likely to be inflammable. I suppose her Irish aunt knows nothing of her prospects?"

"No, not a whisper can have reached her. We have no mutual acquaintances."

"Then take my advice, and keep the amount of Rhoda's wealth in the background. Rhoda is your ward until she is twenty-five, thanks to her cautious old grandfather—and you merely make her an allowance."

"Yes, but she looks rich and extravagant," objected Mrs. Kyle, "and she knows she can have as much money in reason as she pleases; if she poses as a poor relation, it may lead to some awkward developments. You have thrown a huge obstacle in her path, and provided me with an unanswerable argument. If the girl goes over as 'the rich Miss Kyle,' she will have no peace, and must live in the limelight which plays on *money*. On the other hand, if she keeps her

fortune, so to speak, up her sleeve, when her poverty-stricken relations discover the truth, they will denounce her as a double-faced deceiver!"

"Well, well, well!" ejaculated Dr. Ambrose, "I daresay there may be complications. You can't make an omelette without breaking eggs. Consult the young lady, and get her opinion on the subject. And here she comes to speak for herself!"

CHAPTER II

MISS KYLE entered: a slender vision of symmetry and grace—a symmetry and grace particularly emphasized, by a fashionably clinging gown. She crossed the room with an arresting air of surety in her carriage, and offered a languid hand to Dr. Ambrose, who raised it to his lips, and then proceeded to feel her pulse.

“Oh, I’m all right!” she declared in a clear, rather thrilling voice, as she snatched away her wrist with a gesture of impatience; but in spite of her protestation, she looked fragile and delicate—a pale girl, with bright brown eyes, a transparent skin, and masses of mahogany-coloured hair, that seemed a heavy burden for a small, stag-like head. Her nose was too short for beauty, but her mouth and teeth were perfection itself. She carried a large Spanish fan in an almost transparent hand, and wore a string of remarkably fine pearls.

“Well, I suppose you two kind people have been holding a consultation over me, laid your heads together, and have settled my fate.”

As she spoke, she sank into a low *bergère*, and crossed a pair of exquisitely shod feet.

"I know Aunt Char wants to pack me off to Switzerland, from Aix. Don't you, Aunt Char?"

"There will be no Aix for you, Rhoda," declared Dr. Ambrose. "What you want is the country, rest, and the simple life."

"Yes," she assented, with a smile. "Nuts, apples, and the air cure—monkey fashion."

"And the sooner" (waving away her suggestion) "you make a start the better," and he looked at her thoughtfully.

"The question is, where am I to start for? Aunt Char is dead against Ireland; and yet," gesticulating with the fan, "my only relative lives there, and offers me a home, whilst she is away. I have travelled all over the Continent. I've been to Norway, Algiers, Egypt, and last winter to India. But I've never set foot in my mother's country—and it's only three hours by sea."

She paused, thrust her hand into a mysterious pocket, and added: "I've had a letter from Aunt Kathleen by the second post. I'd like to read it to you both."

"All right, let's hear it," said Dr. Ambrose, leaning back, and deliberately assuming his pince-nez.

The girl produced, and slowly unfolded a letter, written in a dashing but legible hand.

"'Lismoyle,'" she began, "'near Doonbeg, Ireland.' No date.

“ ‘MY DEAR STRANGER NIECE,

“ ‘I have received yours, and do hope you may make up your mind to come over to us. I can offer you a happy home, while your aunt is abroad ; and the longer you stay, the better we shall be pleased—and that’s the Holy Truth. I have always had a wish for you—my only sister’s only child. Oh, it was a sad day for *me*, when she married Captain Kyle, and went off to India. Your grandfather was very bitter against us, and kept us in the background, like some terrible family scandal ; and yet our ancestors were buried at Holy Isle in the Shannon, a thousand years ago ; and were well known, and honoured even then ; and I’ve heard it said, that the Kyles were *in trade*. However that may be, when you came home a poor little orphan, old Mr. Kyle put himself between you, and Ireland, and returned my letters unopened. Well, I am now your nearest blood relation, and look upon myself as your *mother* ; and I know I could love you, and make you love me.

“ ‘This place is as old as the hills, and was once a fortified castle, but is a ruin now. We are eight miles from a town, three from a stamp, and are just buried in the country. I have two nice girls. One, the eldest, my step-daughter, is mad about gardening and poultry ! The other, my own child, is all for tennis, and dancing, and *life*. We have a new tub-car—I’ll tell you all about the motor when I see you—and a yard full of fine horses. I

can promise you plenty of milk, eggs, pure fresh air, and lots of friendly neighbours. The place is healthy. The people may be sickly, but they never die all out. We have an old woman of one hundred and four in the village; her face is so wrinkled, you can hardly see it, but she speaks well for our climate, and has her wits still.

“ ‘ You talk of coming as a P. G.—which, I believe, means “ a paying guest ”—and I’m not too proud to take money from my own kin, so you may pay me what you please, and what you can afford. I know your grandfather was well off, but I expect you are like your father and mother—on the poor side. I remember her writing to tell me, she was hard set to find money for your cradle, and baby clothes. Poor or not, I hope you will make up your mind to come to Ireland. Remember, half of you belongs to her. Now, my dear, you have only to fix your own day and train, and you will find a hundred thousand welcomes for you at Lismoyle. Our station is Doonbeg, and we will *all* be there. Do try and come before the gooseberries and raspberries are over. We sell the peaches—not being too rich, as you may suppose—and if you can put a few pounds a week into the family purse, we shall all be on the pig’s back !

“ ‘ Write soon, dear child, to your loving aunt,

“ ‘ KATHLEEN CONROY.

“ ‘ P.S.—If you are fond of animals, we have

three dogs, a tame fox, and a couple of peacocks. The peahen has just hatched out a lovely brood of Buff Orpingtons—fifteen, no less. She may be a bit surprised, as she only lays two eggs. When you write, address—"Madame" Conroy—there has never been a "Mrs." at Lismoyle."

When Rhoda's clear voice ceased, there was a momentary silence. Then, as she folded up her letter, she looked interrogatively from one to the other of her companions, and asked :

"What do you think of it?"

"I think it's the letter of a kind, warm-hearted, Irishwoman," replied Dr. Ambrose.

"And you, Aunt Char?"

"Oh, yes, kind enough, but vague and impulsive. If they have a motor, and a yard full of fine horses, why are a few pounds a week such a grand thing? And what does she mean by saying the place is a ruin? Why does a peahen hatch chickens? Why does she call herself 'Madame'?"

"All these questions I will answer most particularly and truthfully, as soon as I have solved them myself," replied her niece, with an engaging smile.

"She does not seem to offer the sort of home you are accustomed to. What do you think, dear?"

"That I'm sure my Aunt Kathleen must be absolutely unique, and well worth a visit—and I'm simply dying to see her!"

"Yes—to make fun of. Oh, Rhoda!"

"No, no. That would indeed be a base return for her kindness. I am sure I shall be fond of Aunt Kathleen, but I can't help thinking that she is an odd, unexpected sort of person."

"Oh, by all accounts the Irish are different to other people; you'll soon discover that," said Mrs. Kyle.

"Shall I? Well, Aunt's letter makes me keener than ever, and I'm really looking forward to travelling in a tub-car, or on the pig's back."

"I'm afraid, my dear, you will find the idea more agreeable, than the actual experience."

"I warn you, that I am invading Ireland, in a pure spirit of curiosity, and adventure."

"And contrariness," added her aunt. "I prophesy, that you will be sick of Lismoyle in a fortnight, and I shall be able to settle you nicely in Switzerland before I start."

"Then all I can say is, 'Wait and see.'"

"And now about money? You couldn't possibly offer less than five guineas a week for Parker, and yourself, could you?"

"No, of course not."

"I daresay you will be using the motor, and perhaps they will spare you some peaches!"

Then Mrs. Kyle suddenly remembered Dr. Ambrose's suggestion with regard to the girl's money, and expectations.

"However, no need to joke about motors, and peaches, for there is one insuperable objection to your

plan, dear child. I suppose you have not realized, that every fortune-hunter in the province of Munster will lay siege to Miss Kyle, the heiress! Irishmen are notoriously good-looking, fascinating, and adventurous. My darling, precious niece, may be run away with, and married, before I land in Colombo!"

"But, pray, who is to know that your darling, precious, niece, *is* an heiress?" cried the girl, with a vigorous wave of her fan. "How could the news leak out? Aunt Kathleen and her belongings are as much in the dark about *me*, as I am about them."

"And yet you are bent upon taking this leap in the dark."

"I am. For here is a magnificent, and romantic opportunity, of being for once accepted for myself, and without any *arrière pensée* of money. There will be no talk of 'Miss Kyle—not a bad-looking girl—grand-daughter of old Kyle, of Leadenhall Street, who will have a big fortune when she comes of age.' What fun it will be, to take them all in, and play the poor relation! Do think of the joy and the novelty of having to rely on my own personality, of being liked, or disliked for myself—without any background of sables, and pearls, and motor-cars. Why, the mere idea, adds another and an absolutely irresistible attraction, to the lure of Ireland."

"You can never keep the money a secret," declared her aunt with emphasis. "Gold will shine out, through *some* chink."

"Now, Aunt Char, you know, as well as anyone, that I can hold my tongue when necessary." Then rising to her feet, Rhoda laid her hand upon her heart, and added with a dramatic air: "I here solemnly promise, and take Doctor Ambrose to witness, that under no circumstances, short of the rack, will I open my lips on the subject of my fortune,—till you return from your tour."

"Oh, well, we shall see! Six months is a long time," and Mrs. Kyle sniffed.

"But why should I spoil my own enjoyment?" argued the girl. "I am simply longing to find myself in the palace of truth."

"Where all the time you will be acting an *untruth*," rejoined her aunt sharply.

"No, dear—not at all! I have only two hundred a year until I'm twenty-five. Grandpapa was so desperately afraid I should make a foolish match; and although you are awfully liberal, yet I am entirely dependent on *you*, until I come of age next June."

"I see you have a nice elastic conscience!"

"Perhaps it is. But, at any rate, it is not *dead*, and it urges me to go and make friends with my mother's people, whom I have ignored until now."

All the time Rhoda talked, she was gliding slowly up and down the room, fanning herself with a foreign grace. "If I were to appear among them as a fashionable heiress, I am sure they would be scared, and I'd never, never, get to know them really, and truly. By the way, I've not heard the

exact details. I have no idea of what my income will be?" and she suddenly stood still, and gazed at her aunt, with an air of interrogation.

"Then you'd better ask your trustee," and Mrs. Kyle nodded towards Dr. Ambrose.

Dr. Ambrose, who had been lounging in an arm-chair, listening to the discussion between aunt and niece, now rose, and took a stand in front of the empty fireplace.

"You want to know the amount of your fortune, Rhoda? and I'll tell you as well as I can,—making a rough guess. You've had a long minority, and I believe you will come in to about seven thousand a year."

"Oh, what a load of money! What am I to do with it?" demanded his ward, declaiming with outspread fan.

"Spend it," he replied. "Your tastes are luxurious and expensive, my dear young lady. You may buy a villa on the Riviera, become a collector of pearls or pictures—keep racehorses. There are lots of ways of squandering a fortune."

"No, no, none of those ways for *me*. I live among rich people, but I don't think I'm naturally extravagant. I know you will both smile, when I tell you that I've always had a hankering for a sunny cottage, a large garden full of flowers, and lots of pets. Somehow I feel a vocation for weeding, raking, planting, washing dogs, gathering fruit, and even doing a little dusting!"

"How preposterous! how silly you are, Rhoda!" cried her aunt. "You know absolutely nothing of dogs, or gardening."

"Hence this unsatisfied craving!" argued the girl.

"You are not cut out for washing dogs—why, you've never even washed your own hair! Accept the fact, that you were born to be rich."

"No, no, darling Aunt Char. When I was born in that little bungalow in Bareilly I was born very poor. And now I mean to see, how I can manage on two hundred a year. This is all I can really call my own, and I will stick to it, till next June."

"But, my dear child, it will be swallowed up by five guineas a week, and Parker's wages. You won't even have money for cigarettes!"

"Then, if you will pay Parker, and lodge one hundred and fifty to my credit at Coutts', I vow I'll not spend another farthing till May. Even if I am hard up—I shall like to know how it *feels*."

"What a girl!" exclaimed Mrs. Kyle, appealing to Dr. Ambrose, who stood on the hearthrug, twirling his eyeglass, a mute referee between aunt and niece. "She wants to rough it—I dare not say 'pig it'—in an out-of-the-way part of Ireland, and play at being hard up. What do you say?"

"Speaking as a medical man," he replied, "it's my opinion that the absolute change of surroundings, the soft, soothing Irish air, will benefit Rhoda's lungs and nerves; especially if she is out all day long, has lots

of fresh milk, and goes early to bed. As far as her health is concerned, I approve of her trip to Ireland."

"There!" exclaimed the girl, with a triumphant wave of her fan.

"Yes," raising a mandatory hand, "but there are other elements, which are not of the same satisfactory nature. Miss Rhoda will miss her luxuries, and amusements. She may find her aunt's establishment what is called 'through other,' and slack, and have considerable calls upon her purse. And this business of keeping her fortune a dead secret for such a long time, may have some awkward consequences. However, perhaps on the whole, the change and experience, will be for her benefit, and she can learn a lesson in economy."

"Of course I shall, dear," said Rhoda, turning to her aunt. "And the lesson will do me no end of good. You know, when you saw Reynard's last account for my frocks and hats, you actually became quite pale! When you return, and embrace me after my six months' mortification, I am confident you will be delighted." And she bent down, and stroked Mrs. Kyle's hand, and kissed her warmly on both cheeks. "There's the bell! I expect the Vydons and a lot of people will turn up at tea. Now, Dr. Ambrose and Aunt Char, remember you both tell the *same* tale."

And she made a pirouette in the middle of the room as she added: "I'm going to Ireland!"

Almost before Miss Kyle had subsided into her chair, Lady Vydon entered, followed by her son. She was a handsome, white-haired, matron, who belonged to an exclusive set, and was a notable bridge-player, and hostess. Captain Vydon was handsome, too, in a dark, rather sinister, style; an admirable dancer and shot, always immaculately dressed, a member of a smart club, and to be found at every important wedding, dinner-party and ball in town. Although he lived free of expense with his mother, in Lowndes Square, it was said, that Algy Vydon was in money difficulties—the result of gambling, betting, and plunging on the Stock Exchange. It was also whispered, that he intended to recoup himself with a wealthy marriage, and had selected Miss Kyle for the happy bride.

Lady Dolly Lacy arrived immediately after the Vydons, a pretty, lively young woman, with extraordinarily expressive eyes. She was dressed in the latest Parisian craze, and accompanied by an escort of two Guardsmen.

The visitors listened to the news respecting Miss Kyle's movements with incredulous surprise, and the conversation which subsequently flowed, was laden with remonstrance and argument.

Captain Vydon, with a piece of bread and butter in his delicate, brown fingers, his glittering black eyes fixed on Rhoda, said:

"I shall certainly look you up in Ireland, Miss Kyle—and report on you—ahem!"

"I don't think you will find it worth your trouble," she answered carelessly.

"Kilbeggan, did you say? It's the heart of a ripping hunt. Oh, yes, you'll see me," nodding his head. "Two birds with one stone—er—what's the name of your aunt?"

"Conroy—Madame Conroy."

"Conroy," repeated one of the Guardsmen. "I met a Conroy, when I was shooting in India three or four years ago, an awfully smart fellow in a Bengal Cavalry regiment. Looked simply ripping in his gold and blue turban—a nailer at polo, and tent-pegging. Awfully becoming thing a turban! These Eastern chaps knew what they were about."

"You might try and introduce the pattern into your own regiment," suggested Rhoda.

"Er—only wish I could!"

"At least, it will give you an idea for the next fancy dress ball."

"There will be no fancy dress balls for *you*, Miss Kyle, if you go to Ireland. You really will have a rotten time!"

"Won't she?" agreed Lady Dolly. "I look upon the expedition as sheer madness, and have talked myself hoarse. I want her so badly up in Scotland."

"I know, and it's very good of you, Dolly darling; but the die is cast, the elders have given a sort of sanction, and my watchword is 'Erin go Bragh'!"

"Isn't she hopeless?" exclaimed Lady Dolly, looking over at the Guardsman with her eloquent

eyes. " And, you know, there are such odd—unexpected happenings in Ireland."

" Boycotting—banshees—broken heads? "

" Oh no, not quite so bad as that; but it's a strange, far-away, misty sort of country. I'd a thousand times rather Rhoda was going to China! "

CHAPTER III

AFTER an interchange of formal letters between Mrs. Kyle, and Madame Conroy—and several effusive epistles from the latter to her niece—it was finally decided that Miss Kyle (always sure of herself and decisive) was to have her own way, and visit Ireland. A week later found her at Euston Station, awaiting the departure of the night mail. The young lady was travelling in comfort, accompanied by Parker, her middle-aged maid—a tight-looking, sallow little woman (warranted to turn out a fashionable mistress in adequate style, as well as to pack and travel). Hitherto her excursions had been limited to Aix and Monte Carlo, where she had acquired a nice critical taste in wine, coffee and dainty dishes. Not one of her acquaintance had ever penetrated into the West; and she had an idea that Ireland was a country where it rained a good deal, and the natives were given to quarrelling. Nevertheless, she ventured to risk the expedition, as Mrs. Kyle's arrangements were on a liberal scale,

and she liked her young lady, who did her credit, and was both easy-going, and generous.

The crowd assembled to take leave of Rhoda Kyle spoke volumes for her popularity. Had not each and all been compelled to dine at the inhuman hour of seven? or to gobble down their food, and risk the consequences? Mrs. Kyle and Dr. Ambrose accompanied the traveller, and here were also Lady Vydon and her son, Lady Dolly and a friend, Colonel and Mrs. Marshall, a benevolent, worn-looking dean, a fashionable portrait painter, and various others too numerous to mention. In the midst of the throng stood Isaac Kyle's heiress, wearing a long silk travelling coat, and carrying a great bunch of lilies-of-the-valley: a farewell offering from Lord Finsbury, who hovered on the edge of the circle, looking unusually plain and disconsolate.

"I declare you have quite a bridal air!" remarked Captain Vydon, peering at the girl between his thick black lashes. "What with the white bouquet, and the crowd, it's like a wedding send-off. All that's wanted, is the thrice happy man!"

"Who, as it happens, is *not* wanted," she answered emphatically.

Rhoda detested Algy Vydon, and when he looked at her in that way, and made melancholy eyes, she felt it would be a priceless joy to hit him.

"Mind you take great, great, care of yourself, darling," murmured her aunt, as she embraced and took leave of her in the sleeper. "Wire to-morrow ;

write to me daily to Aix, and tell me *everything*. I am afraid you will find disappointments; they say that in Ireland, the impossible always occurs—the inevitable never comes off! Oh, my dear, obstinate child, how I wish you were not going!”

“Live out of doors, but don’t sit in draughts,” advised Dr. Ambrose, as Rhoda stood in the door of the car. “Don’t get your feet wet, or lose your luggage.”

“Or your heart,” supplemented Captain Vydon, thrusting his dark, handsome head over the doctor’s shoulder. “Don’t lose that in Ireland, dear young lady.”

He really had a weakness for Rhoda Kyle. She was no beauty—but what a figure—perfection! her hands and feet, delicious! Also, she was a cool, *insouciant* little devil, who invariably piqued his *amour propre*. As for family, although she looked “born” to her finger-tips, everyone knew that old Kyle was self-made—and made of wool, at that! But his granddaughter had a very pretty fortune pinned to her petticoat—some said a hundred and fifty thousand pounds. Yes, he would certainly keep his eye upon her, and look her up in Ireland, and he took leave of the young lady with a lingering squeeze of her hand.

“Be sure you write to me every week,” said Lady Dolly, pressing close to the carriage as she spoke; “reams and reams—and tell me what you do, who you see, what they say to you, and how many proposals you have?”

She was closely followed by Lord Finsbury, who

looked so abjectly unhappy, that the girl, moved to compassion, threw him an enchanting—not to say encouraging—smile.

“Stand back there! Stand back!” shouted a voice. A flag dropped, the long Irish mail began to move, and Rhoda leaned out of the window, kissing her hand to the group who were vigorously waving handkerchiefs. In another moment she had been carried from their sight.

Miss Kyle drew back into her own compartment (which was crowded up with wraps, jewel- and dressing-cases, golf-sticks, and piles of papers and magazines), unpinned her “going-away” hat, pulled off her gloves, and sat down to meditate. She was now from this moment (a quarter to nine on the evening of August the Third) on what is termed “her own” for the first time in her life of twenty-four years: at liberty to do precisely as she pleased for six whole months, and sensible of a throb of complete, and joyful, freedom! Still she was leaving her old friends, her accustomed haunts, and going forth among total strangers. What had impelled her to this? Something within herself. Some strange, mystic impulse: a curious, tormenting urgency, seemed to have forced, and driven her. Was it the call of her Irish blood? Was it heredity stretching out its long arms? Was it an uncanny element that beckoned? or simply her own spirit of inherent contrariness? Well, she had burned her boats, parted from Aunt Char, and many other people she cared for. Also

from poor, ugly Jack Finsbury, and odious Algy Vydon, and taken her own way. Where would it lead her? One of her partners, a smart A.D.C., had drawn for her benefit, the disheartening picture of a most distressful country, and prophesied her speedy escape.

No matter what disappointments and experiences awaited her, she was resolved to remain, and put in the whole six months. After her confidence, determination and insistence, nothing would induce her to, so to speak, "climb down," return to London, confess that she had been foolish and wrong-headed, and had made a gigantic mistake! If mistake it should prove—on her own head be it!

After all, she was *en route* to her mother's sister, her nearest of kin; and Aunt Kathleen had written her such intimate, affectionate, letters, that already she seemed to know her; and no doubt the "send-off" she had just been accorded, would be more than matched by the warm Irish welcome awaiting her on the other side. She sat for a long time gazing out of the window, making good resolutions, and nursing happy hopes, as the Irish mail shrieked at stations, and thundered along through the warm summer night. At last, she lay down to rest, soon fell asleep, and slumbered like an infant, till aroused by the shouts of "Holyhead! Holyhead! Holyhead!"

The crossing in the *Leinster* proved smooth as the proverbial duckpond—to the enormous relief of a multitude of passengers; for the tourist season had

commenced, and the saloon was crammed. Rhoda was struck by the sound of many brogues; among these soft, rich voices, her own, as she spoke to Parker, sounded rather high, and shrill. She hurried up on deck in order to catch a view of the approach to Kingstown. The fresh morning breeze greeted her pale cheeks, as she leaned against the bulwarks and surveyed the scene. No one had prepared her for the beauty of this Bay of Dublin, and she contemplated the long sweep of mountains with their exquisite purple shades, the curving coast, the white villas and slim church-spires, with astonished admiration.

Dublin was still asleep, as the train for the south, wound above its streets and suburbs. After Kingsbridge and breakfast, Rhoda settled herself in the corner of the carriage, and, neglecting her supply of magazines, prepared to concentrate her attention upon Ireland. At first, how disappointing! Green, yes, intensely green; but oh, what empty fields, with here and there a few little red bullocks, or a flock of geese. Certainly, there were various neat slated cottages, but rarely a human being to be seen.

As the mail train sped south, the prospect changed. A line of blue mountains loomed on the horizon, the land looked richer, there were golden fields of oats, and harvesters busy hay-making; and yet the impression on the stranger's mind, was a sense of loneliness and melancholy.

At a junction, Parker put down her copy of *Tit-Bits*, and began to gather up wraps.

"We change here, miss. I'll get out first, and see after the luggage."

Her mistress, a little stiff, descended, and looked about. A man was shouting what sounded like gibberish, but among the multitude of syllables, she caught the word "Doonbeg."

"Yer train's the first in," said a breathless porter as he collected and piled up her belongings. "It's fornint ye on the other side, and mostly late. I'll lave the things here, and be back in a brace of shakes. Maybe yer ladyship would like to take a sate in the waiting-room?"

No, her ladyship preferred to walk up and down, and inspect her fellow-travellers. She noticed a great many tweed-clad tourists with golf sticks, and cameras; chattering girls, and their juvenile mothers, wearing short tight skirts and voluminous motor-veils, numbers of third-class passengers, but so far, nothing that could be called Irish and distinctive, except one old man who was selling blackthorn sticks.

Presently a crowded train came hissing alongside the departure platform, and picking up her bag and wrap, Rhoda hurried towards it. She turned the handle of a dusty first-class carriage, which was already occupied by four women, and overflowing with parcels of the most curious and varied description—chiefly baskets, bundles and cardboard boxes. One of the women, with a smothered protest, backed reluctantly from the door.

"I'm really sorry," said the interloper, in her clear

English voice, "but we are obliged to get in—the other compartments seem full."

"I misdoubt, if this is your train at all, at all," protested the door-keeper, in a strong American accent.

"Oh, yes, the porter said so," replied the young lady. "Parker, you might put the umbrellas, and tea-basket, in the rack."

The individual with the American accent now thrust her head and shoulders through the window, and after a long and exhaustive survey, drew back, and announced :

"There's no sign of Andy Mack whatever ! No, nor a glint of him !"

This remark was addressed to a pretty girl with eyes like stars, who was seated in the further corner.

"What day did you tell him to meet you, Mary asthore ?"

"I wrote and told him Wednesday, Annie Jane."

"And isn't this Tuesday ? Of all the omadhauns ye're the prize ! Well, well, well, to be sure !"

The poor prize omadhaun, suddenly hid her face in her hands, tears began to trickle through her fingers, and to stain her yellow cotton gloves.

At this moment, and almost simultaneously with the whistle, the breathless porter reappeared.

"Oh, begob, miss," he panted, "you're in the wrong train !"

"But you said——" began Rhoda.

"My mistake, miss," he gasped ; "but me head

was that full of them butter-tubs, I didn't know what I was about. It's too late now to stir ye," running alongside the moving carriage ; " change at Killakissy Junction, and come back on the twelve. It'll only lose ye an hour," and he cast off, still running.

" I knew well you were wrong," said Annie Jane, who seemed to have taken charge of the whole party. " Sure, and isn't this an emigrant train ? "

" Emigrant " repeated Rhoda, in a faint voice, as visions of being carried across the Atlantic, rose before her eyes.

" Yes ; though you may see, miss, I am not an emigrant myself," and she threw up her chin with a jerk.

The English girl looked at her gravely ; a woman of five-and-thirty, with a sallow skin, a ridiculous little cocked nose, a pair of quick, intelligent eyes, and quantities of sandy hair. She wore a hat that had long seen its best days, and was now in the " sere and yellow." One doubtless put together in Paris, and bought second-hand in New York city. It was composed of pale grey velvet, with a wide band of tarnished gold galloon, lined with rose colour, and decorated with a jaunty tuft of feathers. A blue cloth costume, gold chain, and bangles, completed the toilette.

" I've been twelve years in the States, and in real good posts, and so has my sister," introducing with a wave of her hand, a young woman wearing a black hat, with an herbaceous border.

"We came over on a vacation four months ago, and are taking these two young ladies back with us, as 'generals,'" and Annie Jane indicated the "omadhaun," and another pretty, dark girl, whose face was disfigured with tears. "Isn't it cruel, to see all these fine young people leaving the country? But what can they do? There's no employment. The land's so poor. There's Mary, over in the corner; she's the eldest of nine children, and all they have to live on is their father's horse and car. He's a driver at Kilkee, and picks up a bit in the season; but the rest of the year—God bless us! what's carting turf? And that's all there is to it!"

"But I always understood that Ireland was such a rich pastoral country," protested the stranger.

"Not in our parts, miss. Why, where we live, as someone said—faix, I believe it was one of Cromwell's devils—there's not water to drown, wood to hang, nor earth to bury, a man. 'Tis all rocks, and stones."

As she talked with extraordinary fluency, Annie Jane was busy with a little hand-portmanteau; from which, after rummaging through its contents, she extracted a bottle, containing a clear yellow liquid.

"Where's the glass, Mary asthore?"

Mary asthore dived into a hand-bag, and produced a footless wineglass. This Annie Jane carefully filled to the brim, and offered to Rhoda.

"What is it?" she inquired politely.

"Just whisky! Take it right off! It's potheen, and will do you good."

"I—I really could not," protested the girl, drawing back. Then seeing a cloud gathering on the woman's face, she added, with a smile: "I'm not allowed to touch spirits—by the doctor's orders."

"Then you'll have a drop, dear? I tell you it's bully!" said hospitable Annie Jane, passing the glass to Parker, whose gesture and face of horror were so tragic, that her mistress was compelled to turn to the window, in order to conceal her amusement.

"*Take it!*" commanded Annie Jane. "It will put the life into ye. Why, woman," she added, with pitiless candour, "your face is as yellow as a duck's foot!"

But Parker, with a wide-spread hand, and half-closed eyes, kept the little glass steadily at bay, and Annie Jane drank off its contents herself. Then she offered the same refreshment to her three companions—who accepted it without demur.

"You see, we're all a bit upset," explained the temporary hostess. "It's awful hard work getting up before daylight, to say good-bye to your own—never knowing if you'll ever lay an eye on them again."

As she spoke, she produced a newspaper parcel, which proved to contain a cold roast fowl, and a loaf of bread. This, after offering a portion to Rhoda—and pointedly ignoring Parker—Annie Jane and her friends, with the aid of their fingers, speedily disposed of, and threw the crumbs and bones, out of the window.

During this performance Parker maintained an

attitude of regal aloofness, holding, as it were, a shield of *Tit-Bits* between her gentility, and these Irish savages. Her mistress, however, was less fastidious, and presented her fellow-travellers with a box of chocolates for their second course. This gift made an excellent impression, and opened still wider the mouth of their glib spokeswoman.

"We get to Cork this afternoon," she announced. "I'm glad we're not stopping. I mislike the Cork people: they are too sweet, and live too near the Blarney Stone! We go off to-morrow morning by the Cunard liner from Queenstown."

"Are there many emigrants?"

"A good few on this train. Sometimes, to see them they are leaving behind on the platform would tear your heart in two pieces. 'Twas worse about forty year ago, for then, by my faith, it was good-bye till *death*. They say it was awful when the train moved on, and the poor people raised what's called the 'keen,' or Irish cry. Oh, it would just pierce through you like a dagger. Now there are cheap fares, and we come and go—though barrin' one's own, what is there to come for? And yet you can see for yourself, miss, that Ireland is a beautiful country—but shockingly poor. We have no factories to speak of."

"But you make frieze and linen, and butter, and stout," argued Rhoda.

"Oh, frieze—that's not much! As for butter and them creameries, the back of me hand to them! There

soon won't be a farmer's daughter able to make a pound of butter, since every drop of milk goes to the creameries—a penny a quart. Well, now, here's Clonsast, and a pretty big crowd. I see a newly-married couple among them too. Would you like to take a view, miss?" generously withdrawing from the window as she spoke.

Rhoda stood up, and beheld a huddled mass of men and women: many of the latter bareheaded and wearing shawls. She gathered that a young couple, "Mary" and "Martin," were getting a grand send-off, and noticed the emotional faces and gestures of their friends, heard the loud good-byes, the blessings, and the sobs.

"Oh, do look at that poor old creature!" she exclaimed, as she caught sight of a face, twisted and grey with agony.

"Aye, it's hard on the old," assented Annie Jane, who was peering over her shoulder. "Her son is going: a fine, tight-skinned boy too, and maybe the last she has! No, she'll never see him again in this world; an' well she knows that!"

Presently the train moved slowly away, amid shouts and cries and a loud outburst of wailing, and Rhoda's eyes filled with quick tears, as she caught sight of the bereaved mother, supported between two women. The face haunted her for years.

It appeared that she and Annie Jane, were the sole members of the party who were interested in the emigrants. Mary and her friend, were plunged in

their own troubles, Annie Jane's sister, was casually arranging her hair with a rack comb, whilst Parker represented an image of stone.

"I could not make out what the people were saying," said Rhoda with a glance of surprise.

"Sure then, miss, it would be hard for you!" replied Annie Jane. "They are mostly talking Irish."

"And do you speak it?"

"No, not to say well; but Mary there talks beautiful, and was in the fifth book." Then suddenly exhorting her: "Mary alannah, don't be so down. Look at *me*. Amn't I, the fine pattern of a girl, that left her home and went to America, and come back twice? You'll be the same, never fear. See, now, I'll send Andy a wire, and he'll be in Cork to-night. Will *that* please ye?"

At the next station, there was a crowd, largely composed of the friends of "Martin" and "Mary," and these were not empty-handed. They swarmed round the carriage with wedding presents of the most varied description: a cushion, a cake (frosted), a basket, a bottle, a small bag of potatoes, and a shawl. The most amazing contribution, was a gaily trimmed hat, complete with two gaudy glass-topped pins stuck in the crown. Many were the shouts of "Good luck to ye, Martin! Good luck to ye, Mary!" And of the host of well-wishers collected about their compartment, each was eager for a personal greeting, and a particular farewell.

Besides this popular pair, there was a considerable

contingent of emigrants, and scenes of harrowing partings were once more repeated; friends striving and pressing for a last word, a last look, a last handshake, and even when the train had started, running alongside, waving and calling, till their farewells were borne on the still summer air, in one long, piteous cry.

In spite of her stoical efforts, Rhoda was deeply affected. Two tears trickled down her face and dropped upon her folded hands. Seeing this, the ever-ready Annie Jane, leaned over and tendered a clean coarse handkerchief, reeking of a scent that smelt like hair oil! but fastidious Miss Kyle accepted the sympathetic attention with gratitude—although a cobweb, steeped, as it were, in violets, lay in her coat pocket.—As she returned the loan, Annie Jane said:

“Well now, miss, here’s Killakissy, your station. No mistake *this* time. When ye get back to the junction, you ought to give that lazy villain of a porter, a real basting!”

“I wish you all a pleasant voyage,” said Rhoda. “Please keep the magazines, and papers to read on your journey.”

The four travellers rose as one woman, assisted to collect her belongings, and each shook hands, when she descended on the platform, amidst a buzz of good wishes, and adieux.

The “villain of a porter,” not a whit disconcerted, accepted the young lady’s rebuke with smiles. In fact, he was so eloquent, and full of excuses, that he

almost persuaded her that the misunderstanding was her own !

“ Ye wor in too great a hurry, my lady, so ye wor. That’s the way with the English. And, anyhow, ye got a grand ride to Killakissy and back, for *nothing*. Here’s the Doonbeg train now. She’s before her time too. That ‘ Norah ’ engine is a queer old witch—Yes, I put all your things in, no fear—Ye never know what divil’s trick she’ll play ye ! Sometimes, she sits down on the line, for all the world like a hatchin’ hen ; other times, if she takes the notion, there’s no holding her, and she’s in ten, or maybe twenty, minutes before she’s due. Thank you, my lady. Good luck to ye, my lady,” and he closed the door with a bang.

CHAPTER IV

DOONBEG, was merely an abject apology for a railway station. Just a small brick building, a shed, and a signal-box. As the train, with protesting squeaks and jerks, came to a standstill, Rhoda opened the carriage door, and looked out eagerly. Strange to say, there was nothing to be seen but a porter, a row of milk-cans, and a sleek black cat—to whom Doonbeg and its surroundings undoubtedly belonged!

The new arrival descended hurriedly, and gazed around her in stricken bewilderment; no, there was no mistake! "Doonbeg" was inscribed in large white letters on a black board. She had despatched a telegram from Killakissy to Lismoyle, explaining her delay, and fixing her arrival by this particular train. Had her wire miscarried?

As she stood waiting whilst Parker emptied the compartment, a little barefooted boy, with wide-apart blue eyes, and a surprisingly dirty face, accosted her.

"Will I be afther takin' charge of your luggage, me lady?"

"Me lady" gravely looked him up and down. He appeared to be about eight years old, and would have fitted with ease into one of her hatboxes.

"'Tis your trunks I'm talkin' about, me lady," he persisted. "If ye will tell me where ye're for, I've an ass's car widout."

Rhoda drew a long breath. And so there was no one to meet her, after all! Was the glorious Irish welcome represented by a ragged child with an ass's car? She recalled last night's effusive send-off, and this morning's blank reception. What a grotesque contrast!

"You could not move them, little boy," she said at last, in a tone of kindly patronage.

"Begob and I could, me lady! Tom Flannigan will give me a hand. Sure, and he's my own cousin."

"Do you mean the porter?"

The child nodded; then added, in short gasping sentences:

"He'll be here in a couple of minutes. He's just tyin' up Mrs. Murphy's washin'. It bruk out all over the platform. The bottom's afther fallin' through the ould basket. It goes every week by this train."

Presently the washing was satisfactorily adjusted, and the train took its leisurely departure, leaving the porter at liberty to notice the new arrivals: an oldish woman in black, with a face like vinegar, and a tall, smart young one in an elegant silk coat. Naturally he addressed himself to her, and in an insinuating key inquired:

" Might I make bold to ask where you are for, me lady? "

" We're for Lismoyle. Do you know it? "

" Is it know it? " he repeated, with an intimate shrug. " Sure, wasn't I reared in the yard! I see none of the family are meeting you with the machine. But Miss Bryda herself was here a week ago."

" Is it far? " inquired Parker, who with an air of martyrdom had seated herself on her own luggage.

" In or about three miles—a nice easy walk."

" How am I to get to Lismoyle? " inquired the young lady.

" Bedad, yer honour, I couldn't rightly tell ye—unless on yer two feet."

" Impossible! Is there no town in the neighbourhood where I can hire a motor? "

" For a town and a motor, there's nothing nearer than Kilbeggan, and that's twelve miles. There's nothing whatever here this day; and we're a good bit knocked about, as the stationmaster's down with whooping cough. He took it off his baby.—And I'm all that's in it! "

Suddenly he threw up his arms, and yelled.

" By jabers, if she hasn't forgotten the mails! " and he indicated the slowly receding white smoke. " Oh," relaxing from his gesture of despair, " she's coming back, so she is. Faix, she'll do it once too often, yet! "

As he spoke, he seized two limp sacks, plunged

from the platform, tore along the line, and flung them to the guard, who made a magnificent catch.

"Now about you, miss," resumed the porter,—precisely as if there had been no interruption.—"Some days, we could do you in grand style, with a jarvey or a jingle. I have it," as his eyes fell on the row of battered milk-cans. "It's all right, miss. Pat Cassidy will be here with his float to take delivery of the empties, and he will drop you at the Cross. Pat has a cart and a fine young horse, and will be proud to give ye a lift. And, begorra, here he comes!" as a dark young man, in very white shirt-sleeves, standing up to drive like a Roman charioteer, came storming into the little enclosure behind the station.

"Patsy!" the porter bawled to him, "Patsy, me boy! I've two ladies for ye here. Will ye drop them at Lismoyle Cross? They are English, and poor walkers. And Madame has missed sending for them."

"An' to be sure I will," replied Pat, leaping to the ground as he spoke, and proceeding to tie up a hot, excited looking bay horse.

"There's lashins of room along with the cans!"

Meanwhile Miss Kyle stood in the doorway—her doubtful face shaded by an expensive parasol—and critically surveyed the flat cart, the wild-looking animal, and the harness mended with twine. Then as her eyes strayed to the long, long, strip, of hot white road, she resolved to make the best of the occasion. As Tom loaded up the cart, she suddenly remembered

her pile of luggage, and made anxious inquiries as to its fate.

"There's no cloakroom on the line would hold it," declared Tom. "No, nor the half of it! I'll make shift with the small things in the ticket-office. The rest must take their chance on the platform until I get a couple of asses' cars, and send them up to the house. There's Coneen, now," indicating the small boy, "come here to me, Coneen. You can take one load?"

"Sure, and amn't I well able for all that's in it?" argued Coneen in a whining key.

"Arrah, don't be talking balderdash! Them boxes weigh tons."

"But surely this child is too small, and too young, to act as carrier?" protested Miss Kyle.

"Ah, not at all, miss! He's a stout little fellow for his age, and does mostly all the carrying for Lismoyle, and the Rectory. How old are ye?" turning to Coneen, who appeared to be on the verge of tears.

"They do be sayin' I'm eleven."

"Anyhow, the ass makes up for him," declared his cousin; "he's a terrible great age. Some gives out he's fifty. Pat is ready for ye, I see; and ye may trust me that the luggage will be all right here."

As Tom the porter assisted Miss Kyle to mount to her novel conveyance, and tucked her rug about her, he said: "Faix, yer ladyship is as souple as our station cat. Sit with your back well in to the

cans, and ye won't feel them, but be grand and comfortable ; and Pat will drop ye at the Cross in no time."

To which the young lady replied : " I hope I won't drop off *long* before I get there ! "

" Arrah, not at all, miss. Sure, what 'ud make ye ? A safe journey," and Tom the porter snatched off his cap as Miss Kyle and her maid, perched precariously among the empties, were driven rapidly out of the station.

" What a beginning ! " thought Rhoda. If people were to see her, how they would laugh ! It really was an amazing experience, to commence a journey in a luxurious " Rolls Royce," and to conclude the same on a milk-float. Well, at least the whole adventure had the merit of novelty.

Irish air was deliciously soft and fresh, the country most vividly and restfully green : elms and stately copper beeches stood out against a misty blue distance, and a perfume of new-mown hay floated in the atmosphere. The bay horse was moving at a slashing pace, and fastidious Miss Kyle was actually amused and exhilarated. Not so Parker, who, established at the other side of the driver, wore a countenance as rigid and as white as death.

" It's a fine day, yer ladyship," Pat began, anxious to entertain, and possibly enlighten, his passenger.

" Yes, lovely ! " she agreed.

" Bedad, we've had a grand summer. This weather has a strong hold, glory be to——"

A wild scream from Parker interrupted this

thanksgiving, as the young horse made a sudden and violent curtsey to a heap of stones.

"Arrah! What are ye shyin' at, ye crazy fool?" cried Pat. "Don't ye know them stones, afther seein' them four times a day, and twice on Sunday?" Then to his passenger: "There's not a hate o' harm in him; only he's young, and gay in himself. I'd give him a latherin' now, only for the milk-cans."

"Don't, don't touch him, my good young man!" implored Parker, seizing him by the arm. "Or if you must, let *me* get down."

"All right, all right, miss, I won't. For if I were to give him a couple of skelps with the whip, he'd likely run away, and have the cans all over the place, and the creamery going mad for them."

Then turning to Rhoda, he said:

"Madame Conroy will be terribly put out at overlooking ye. She's a bit forgetful, a sort of a Traina-haillia, but the pleasantest-spoken lady in Ireland."

Madame's niece made no reply. She had no desire to discuss her aunt with Pat Cassidy. After a dignified pause she asked:

"What mountains are those over there?"

"The Fairy Hills, my lady. And the far-off blue ones are the Galtees. There does be grand poachin' on them."

"What a shame!"

"Faix, miss, and why not? Sure, the wild birds is put there for everyone, and belongs to no one. They're not like geese or turkeys. I'd never lay a

hand on anyone's fowl, but——" then pulling himself up: "See now, if you shoot a scald crow, it's well and good; but if it's a grouse or a woodcock, Mor-iah! you never hear the last of it! besides a fine, and your gun bein' took."

"I suppose you are a fair shot?" she inquired.

"That's as it may be, miss," he answered evasively.

"Do ye see the place we are passing now?"—an imposing grey stone entrance, flanked by solid lodges—

"It belongs to a Mrs. Donovan, three-quarters Irish, bred in Australia. She keeps up great style, and has motor-cars, and men-servants, and a chief."

"A chief?" repeated Miss Kyle. "Chief of what?"

"Oh, he's a chief cook; wonderful for feeding up people. Mrs. Donovan's a credit to him! A fine big lump of a widder woman, with tons of money; and, bedad, that's scarce enough in these parts."

"But I thought times were so much improved of late?"

"Middlin' enough. We have an acre of ground and a new slated house for a shilling a week. But, saving your presence, miss, not much to put in our stomachs. Sure, what's twelve shillings a week, and everything rising? Only for a little slip of a girl in the creamery, I would be off to America with the rest."

"Is twelve shillings all you get?"

"It is so, miss, barrin' a drop of milk. Twelve shillings a week, Sunday and Monday, driving this flighty divil twice a day. The farmers have the land, and are doing nicely, with hundreds at their

back. Good prices for stock and hay—though they keep the shut mouth. It's *my* sort that's out of luck ! Sure, don't most of us live on bread and tea ? ”

“ And potatoes ? ” suggested his passenger.

“ No, potatoes is out of fashion. They're entirely too dear ; and the blight gets at them. Though I'm not sayin' that a few spuds, and sour milk, isn't too bad a supper.”

“ I'm surprised to see the country looking so empty and so lonely. We have hardly met a soul since we started.”

“ 'Tis harvest time, miss, and they are all getting in the hay. But the neighbourhood is lonesome and quiet enough now. Crowds have gone away in thousands, and hundreds of thousands. Fine upstanding boys and girls. There's no employment, ye see. In old times all the big places was full. I've heard my grandfather say (and he was coachman at Lismoyle) that there was no end to the hunting, and racing and dancing ; yes, and faction fights, and murders. These does be talked of yet. But somehow or other now, there's no divilment or heartiness left in the country ! Is this your first visit, my lady ? ”

“ Yes, and my first drive in Ireland, though I'm half Irish.”

“ I thought as much as that myself.”

“ But why ? I have no brogue.”

“ No, miss. But if I may make so free, you have a merry eye, and a tight ankle.”

The owner of eye and ankle coloured with astonishment. If a London taxi-cab driver had dared to remark on Rhoda's eyes and ankles, she would have been disposed to summon the police. Here in this Irish by-road, it did not seem rude or out of character. Was she already succumbing to the seduction of Irish blarney?

"This is the Cross, my lady," announced Pat, as he drew up with a jerk. "Ye have only to keep straight on along till ye see an old demesne wall creepin' to meet ye, and there ye are! When ye get to the gates, mind the yaller dog. He's cross betimes, when left in charge. But give him a belt of yer parasol, and there won't be a word out of him!"

"Thank you for the drive, Pat," said Miss Kyle, as she descended. "Here is something to buy yourself tobacco."

"Sure, I couldn't think of takin' anything at all," he protested. "The honour of drivin' yer ladyship is all I'd be askin'." And as he spoke, his handsome grey eyes looked down into the little palm, in which lay five shillings.

"You really must accept it," she said decidedly.

"Then it's entirely too much, yer honour." After a moment's hesitation he slipped the silver into his pocket. "I'm greatly obliged to ye. Faix, it wasn't for nothing I saw them two magpies this morning! Well, good-bye, my lady," lifting his cap; "good-bye, and I wish ye many happy days."

Then with a chirrup to his horse, Pat drove away.

CHAPTER V

"MANY happy days!" Rhoda repeated to herself. "What a delightful wish!" She stood for a moment looking after her late charioteer, with a dreamy expression on her thin white face. Would she enjoy many happy days in this new land? Perhaps yes, perhaps no; it all lay on the lap of the gods! One thing was certain, if she continued as she had commenced, she was assured of a variety of unexpected adventures.

"I can hardly set one foot before the other," grumbled Parker; "I'm so stiff with clinging to the cart—which was no cart—besides being frightened to death. A milk-float! My word—this is a strange country!"

"Yes; or, rather, we are strange to its ways."

"I can't make out half they are talking about."

"Oh, you will soon get used to them," rejoined her mistress cheerfully.

Parker made no reply, but plodded along in protesting silence, jewel-case in hand.

It was evident to her employer that her maid

disapproved of everything. Please goodness, the rattling of the milk-cart had drowned Pat's comments on her eyes and ankles !

The road was winding and shady, overhung by fine ash and elm trees. To the right lay fields, enclosed by ragged hedges : hedges full of roses and honeysuckle, interspersed by wisps of hay—the largesse of passing carts. On the left, was a high, hoary wall, clad in moss and ivy, and here and there a breach gave a glimpse of thick plantations, and dense undergrowth. Presently this wall was arrested by a lodge and a pair of iron gates, hung between imposing pillars crowned by stone dogs in effigy (wolf-hounds), each supporting a shield emblazoned with a coat-of-arms. The gates were closed. As Parker screamed " Gate, gate ! " and pushed against the heavy latch, a yellow mongrel flew out of the bushes, barking and growling savagely.

" Stand perfectly still," urged Rhoda, " don't pretend to mind, and he won't touch you."

Her advice proved sound. The animal having sniffed and tip-toed round the strangers, his bristles all on end, apparently discovered that they were neither tramps nor tinkers, and suffered them to enter and pass on—satisfied as to their respectability.

The lodge appeared to be deserted ; a few skinny chickens picked about the closed door, otherwise there was no sign of life on the premises. The yellow mongrel, now appeased, decided to abandon his post of gate-keeper, and accompanied the visitors

up the avenue—doubtless animated by canine curiosity, and anxious to discover who they were? and their business?

The Lismoyle approach was of the usual Irish type—lengthy and imposing. As the three proceeded up its curving avenue, there was not a soul to be seen, nor a sound to be heard, beyond the cooing of wood-pigeons, and the continuous hum of insects in the limes. After a steady trudge of ten minutes, the house came into view. It proved to be a large grey mansion, square and solid, the box-like shape—modified by a stately pillared porch; its weather-beaten face, veiled in climbing roses, myrtle, and a superb magnolia; from among such luxuriant adornments, long prim windows peered out on an ill-kept pleasure-ground, and undulating, heavily timbered demesne. The door stood hospitably wide, and three dogs came barking down the steps—a red setter, a fox-terrier, and a Pekingese. Their wrath was however abated and modified, by the presence of the lodge-keeper—who had apparently introduced the strangers, and gone security for their behaviour. After a certain amount of hesitation and consultation, these were suffered to ascend the steps and ring the bell; but no one came to answer the summons—although Parker applied herself to the brass knob with such vigorous indignation that it eventually came off in her hand.

“I think we had better go in, miss, and sit down,” she suggested; “that is, if there are chairs. I’m just aching all over,” she added peevishly.

The hall proved to be lofty and imposing, and there were chairs—chairs of mahogany with armorial bearings on their worn backs, as well as others of distorted wickerwork. A venerable billiard-table occupied the middle of the hall, and on it lay hats, garden baskets, a trowel, and an apron. The walls were covered with arms, heads, some tiger-skins, a series of coloured sporting prints, and a pair of magnificent elk-horns. In one corner, a grandfather's clock pointed mendaciously to the hour of eight!

Parker planted herself on one of the armorial chairs; her mistress selected a more modern shape, settled a cushion at her back, and for some time neither spoke. The Pekingese, in response to a signal, sprang into the young lady's lap; and a peacock stepped in cautiously, and surveyed the strangers with bright-eyed scrutiny.

Suddenly a door was flung open, and a brisk-looking, elderly woman, with a duster over her grizzled locks, bustled in, carrying a dish of scraps and bones—undoubtedly the dogs' dinner.

Her amazement was unbounded, when her eyes fell on the two motionless figures: an elegant young lady, with Pekoe in her lap, and a little angry-looking woman sitting bolt upright like an image. She put down the dish, tore the duster off her head, and stared at the pair in interrogative silence.

"We rang a dozen times," began Parker in a complaining voice. "I rang, till I was tired, and broke the bell."

"Well, anyhow, the bell was broke this three months, so that's no harm!" declared the woman; "and *I'm* tired sending for the man to mend it. I'm sorry you were kept waiting, but I was out in the laundry making jam."

"Is Madame Conroy at home?" inquired Rhoda.

"She is not, miss. She's in Dublin at a wedding, and won't be back for a week. Who shall I say called?"

Miss Kyle hastily put down the Pekingese, and rose to her feet. Her air was tragic, as she asked:

"Surely my aunt expected me?"

The maid gave her a horrified glance, backed to the door, and threw out her hands, as if she would fend off some appalling apparition.

"You're *not* tellin' me you are the mistress's niece? The young lady that's coming next week?"

"Yes, I am Miss Kyle."

"Blessed hour!" dropping her arms. "'Tis next Tuesday, they laid out for ye, and they are away havin' a bit of pleasure before you're due."

"Are they all from home?"

"Yes, miss. Madame and Miss Doatie are in Dublin, and Miss Bryda is at Kilkee, takin' the salt water. If you could only come this day week everything would be grand. As it is, we are givin' the house a turn-out—and have all the carpets up!"

"Surely there must be some mistake," argued Rhoda, "and I really don't think it was mine. I cannot

possibly come this day week; this is the date I fixed—Tuesday the fourth of August."

"Oh, well, maybe so, miss," rejoined the maid, not a little cowed by the glum and glowering countenance of Parker; "I'm frightfully sorry. It's just one of the mistress's mistakes and oversights. She has a shocking memory. When she went away, her last words were: 'Now, Bessie, mind you have everything ready, and the place like a new pin, by the time my niece arrives.' And instead of that," casting up her hands and eyes, "haven't I in the sweeps!"

"Well, I suppose we must only make the best of it," declared the unexpected guest. "Can you get us hot water and something to eat?"

"To be sure, miss, to be sure. I'll do my big best. Come and see your room," and she ushered the new arrival and her maid into an inner hall, and up a beautiful winding staircase, leading to a lofty corridor lined with many doors. As she opened one, she said:

"Miss Bryda picked this room for you, miss. It has a dressing-room for your maid, and a grand view. And you won't be much tormented by the rats."

"What! Have you rats?" cried Rhoda, halting on the threshold.

"Oceans of them, miss! but only in the walls. Sure, they does be in every old house. They are now mostly out in the oats. But in winter, I declare you'd think from the uproar, they were dragging men about

with them, so you would. There's a grand view, you see," going towards the window and pulling up the blinds. "Miss Bryda fixed up the room a bit, and give ye her own carpet. Now, I'll just run down and get the hot water, and see about your lunch," and she took a hasty departure.

The bewildered visitor seated herself on the narrow old mahogany bed, and proceeded to take stock of her new quarters. A large, cheerful room, with three windows in a sort of bow. No curtains, but heavy shutters, with long iron bars; the faded wallpaper had been neatly patched, a few prints were hung about the walls, and over the washhand-stand—which exhibited a blue jug, and a pink basin, the relicts of two sets. There was also a sponge bath, three chairs, a dressing-table in a fresh white petticoat, a pretty pincushion, and a Chippendale looking-glass. So Miss Bryda had made these little preparations. Already her heart warmed to Miss Bryda.

It was two o'clock when luncheon was announced and served in a carpetless dining-room, furnished with heavy mahogany chairs, a beautiful Chippendale sideboard, and hung with family portraits. A place had been laid for Parker, as Bessie explained with profuse apologies, that the "kitchen dinner was over."

The meal consisted of cold mutton and salad, poached eggs, stewed raspberries and cream; the travellers did it ample justice, being ravenously hungry. Afterwards Miss Kyle went out and stood on the

hall-door steps, aware of an agreeable sense of well-being, as associated with an absurd idea of ownership, and being monarch of all she surveyed ! She cemented her acquaintanceship with the peacock, and the dogs,—whose names were respectively “ Pekoe,” “ Kerry ” and “ Freddy.”—“ The royal dog of China,” a sable, with black points, curling tail, and a lovely little black face, was a valuable animal. Rhoda recognized a good Pekingese when she saw one ; Pekoe must be worth from thirty to forty pounds ; yet here he was, a country house dog, consorting with a rakish fox-terrier, and a sporting setter, rolling his best coat in the gravel, and arguing with the peacock over a bone ; yes, and—did she but know it—chasing sheep, and joining with frenzied enthusiasm in rabbit-hunting and rattling. No wonder his dear little turned-in toes were bare of feathering !

As the unwelcomed guest lingered on the steps, surveying the view, she heard the sound of approaching wheels, accompanied by violent whacks and “ Go an now—go *an* wid ye ! ” and, turning, she beheld Coneen, with half of her luggage, drawn by a small staggering donkey. Here at least was employment for Parker, who was looking alarmingly morose. As soon as she had been summoned to take charge of the boxes, and had paid off Coneen, her mistress wandered away to explore the house.

The drawing-room,—with furniture piled in the middle of the floor, the atmosphere impregnated with soap and soda,—was of gracious proportions,

further embellished by a fine Adams ceiling, and solid mahogany doors,—with brass handles, and elaborate plates. A large bow, in which were three long windows, overlooked the neglected pleasure-ground. She opened one of these, descended a few steps, and presently made her way down a laurel tunnel, which led to the gate of an immense walled garden.

The explorer pushed the gate open and entered. Wide gravel walks divided the enclosure into squares of gooseberry, raspberry and currant bushes, bordered by venerable espaliers; she noticed a large greenhouse, also a recently reclaimed flower-garden, gay with roses, and the south wall covered with fruit trees, now laden with pears and plums. From this vast garden, which appeared to be deserted, she unlatched a door, and found herself in the yard. Here all was bustle and life. Horses' lean heads were seen over half-doors, men were going in and out of stables; one was grooming a ticklish animal tied up to a wall, another was polishing a bit, a third had just brought in a cartload of straw. The new-comer felt too shy to venture further, and presently withdrew—as she believed unnoticed—and returned to the garden, which, after all, was not deserted, for she now descried a sack-like blue figure stooping among the raspberry canes, which presently, standing erect, proved to be an immense woman. Her bare arms and face were red and shiny, her coarse black hair was streaked with grey, she had a pair of beetling brows, menacing eyes, and altogether presented a formidable appearance.

"Good afternoon," said Rhoda politely.

The woman surveyed her from head to foot, and acknowledged her presence with a grunt. Then, as the girl's glance fell on a nice basket of fruit, she exclaimed impulsively:

"Oh, what lovely peaches! What are you going to do with them?"

"That's none of your business," was the rude rejoinder. "Suppose I'm takin' them home," said the woman, straightening herself, after stooping to pick up her spoil, and eyeing the questioner with a defiant glare. Something in the girl's expression set fire to a notable temper, and squaring herself in the middle of the walk, the giantess continued: "And now I'll ask *you* something. What are you doing poaching round here, me mealy-faced young stranger? Come after himself, I'll go bail, like the rest of the pack! Ye may save yourself the trouble. He wouldn't look at ye," again surveying her from head to foot, "no, not for all your buckles and your beads." She was undoubtedly alluding to Rhoda's pearls, and her smart French shoes.

"I don't know what you're talking about," said the girl haughtily. "I think you must be intoxicated."

"Is it me intoxicated—*me*?"

With a face aflame, she set down her basket, and folding her great arms with elaborate deliberation, resumed:

"I suppose everyone that's not civil to your ladyship, and on her bare knees, is drunk? That's the

way with the quality, so it is! I'm a mountainy woman," declaiming with a hand the size of a small ham, "and I'd have ye to know this, me cheese-faced Britisher, that before very long, ye'll see a change, an' so ye will! Wees will be yees,—and yees will be wees, and for all ye know, ye'll be doin' my washin'—and how'd ye like that?"

In dignified silence Rhoda made a resolute attempt to pass, and escape from this raging lunatic, but the woman interposed with a violent gesture of her brawny arm.

"No, ye don't!" she exclaimed. "I want first of all to know—Madame an' all bein' away—what ye're doin' here, nosin' round like a strange cat? Come, tell me!"

"Madame Conroy is my aunt, and I've come to stay with her," replied the girl, in a dry sort of voice.

"Your aunt!" she paused. "Oh, holy Fathers! I'll just be totally ruined and destroyed. See here," now shaking a savage fist in the girl's face, "if ye ever let on about them peaches (I've a customer near by gives me half a crown a dozen), I'll—I'll knock the head off ye—so mind that!" Then, picking up her basket, she turned her back on the astonished Britisher, and lurched away, crunching the gravel with a ponderous tread.

This was "big Jane" the washerwoman, who, after a heavy day's work, had refreshed herself with too copious a supply of raw spirits. She generally

took the so-called "cross drop" and when Jane was a "bit on," all her little world prudently gave her a wide berth, for she vented her ill-humour on the first person she encountered—which on the present occasion unfortunately happened to be the individual already known, as "the young lady from London."

After this encounter "the young lady from London" felt considerably shattered, and retreated towards the house, where she found comfort and protection in sitting on the steps surrounded by the dogs. She took the ready Pekinese on her lap, and told him all about the dreadful woman in the garden, and he appeared to give ear to her whisperings with wide-eyed and sympathetic attention.

Rhoda looked at her watch. It was a quarter to four. Too soon to go indoors and change; she was far happier with her present companions than with the grumbling and discontented Parker. The afternoon was curiously still. Not a leaf stirred, the trees around looked massive and stately, great limes trailed their voluminous skirts on the grass, a wine-coloured copper beech stood prominently in the foreground—against a blur of green. Rhoda Kyle knew nothing of forestry, but for the first time she realized the charm, the beauty, and the dignity of trees. Here and there in the demesne a number of young cattle were grazing; some close to the fence which separated the pleasure-ground from the park—handsome red-and-white, or all-red beasts—enjoying in happy ignorance the time of their lives! Beyond

far away plantations arose soft blue hills; these seemed as if they were contemplating the stranger with a personal and kindly air. Was it Ireland, her mother's country, offering her a mystic welcome? How fanciful she had become; soon she would be believing in fairies and leprechauns! Well, at any rate, she was living in a new world, the world of the emotional and unexpected, and yet it was not twenty-four hours since her ears had been assailed by the roar of London traffic, the thunder of motor-buses, and the tinkling of the telephone. What a contrast to the exquisite brooding peace that hung over this stately old Lismoyle! Far and near there reigned an immense unbroken silence—almost to be described, as an expectant pause.—Suddenly this silence was interrupted by the sound of distant strains; a piper was playing as he went along the road, a wild and plaintive melody—that transformed the placid scene, into something ethereal, mysterious, and disturbing. As the notes rose clearly in the warm, still air, the effect on the cattle was electrical; first they raised their heads and listened; then they began to move—some slowly, some at a canter, but one and all in the direction from which the sounds came. It was a surprising spectacle! the beasts, collected into one large herd, had vanished from the neighbourhood of the pleasure-ground, and were streaming towards the piper, as he played "The Lamentation for Kincora"—all unconscious of his strange audience on the other side of the demesne wall!

"Everything is extraordinary here," thought the girl, "even the very cattle! and there seems to be an extra warmth of colour, an element of romantic wildness, over the whole country."

Presently she rose and went up to her room, and there discovered Parker, with her head buried in a trunk, engrossed in unpacking. As she raised her face, it was evident to her mistress that she was not in a gracious mood. She recognized this by the expression of the maid's mouth, which was drawn tightly together, as if by purse-strings.

"I'm not getting out more than a few of your dresses," she announced. "For one thing—there's no place to hang them; and for another, I take it you won't be long here?"

The young lady made no direct reply, but said:

"As the family are not at home, I'll just put on the old white tea-gown." Then, after a pause, she added: "Why do you think I shall not remain here?"

"Well, miss," turning to shake out a skirt, "it's not what you're accustomed to. No carriage, no bathrooms, no carpets. I asked that Bessie for a screwdriver. There's not one in the house. The lock is hanging off my door, and she told me to put a chair against it. I never! And to do the work in this great barrack, with dozens of bedrooms and a ballroom, there's only three women, and an old man—besides an awful giantess that comes in to wash! There's no servants' hall, no housekeeper's room. And really, miss, though I'd like to oblige you, I couldn't

associate with that creature. If you were to see her, it would frighten you."

Parker's mistress had seen her, and been justly alarmed ; but she merely said :

" I daresay my aunt will arrange something when she comes home. I think this funny sort of scrambling life may be rather amusing."

" You won't think so long, miss ; and of that I'm sure. They all just say what they like, and do as they please, and I've to fetch your hot water myself— ! "

" By the way, I must write by the post. When does it leave ? "

" It's gone, miss. The child that brought your luggage took it. But I hear that if you go down to the big gates at five o'clock, the mail-cart driver will post your letters. Of course, it's not regular ; there's nothing regular here—not even the meals. Oh, it's a strange place, this Lismoyle. One might almost as well be on a desert island."

Having offered this opinion, Parker went out of the room, and closed the door with energy.

CHAPTER VI

IT was nearly six o'clock when Rhoda, picturesquely attired in a clinging white tea-gown, and bringing with her an atmosphere of the latest Eastern perfume, trailed down the shallow oak staircase, and encountered the startled eyes of Bessie Kane.

"Oh, miss!" she exclaimed, "and didn't I take ye for an angel from the skies; with the grand sweep of your wings, and tail!"

"No, no, Bessie, it's the other person who has the *tail*," corrected the young lady. "As for an angel, who knows? There's a poem called 'The Angel in the House.'"

"Well, I've no time for poems, miss. The only ones I know are 'Father O'Flynn' and the 'West Clare Railway.' You'll be looking for your tea?"

"Oh, please don't trouble about getting tea for me."

"An' why not? Sure, aren't we getting tea at all hours here. Tea before breakfast; at mid-day, after lunch; at five o'clock, and a cup going to bed—just as the humour takes them! I've settled you in the smoking-room, the drawing-room being upside down,

and taken your tea in there. The Captain might be home to-night—and he mightn't. When he goes to these horse fairs, ye never rightly know when he'll be back ! ”

“ The Captain,” repeated Rhoda, halting at the foot of the stairs. “ Who is he ? ”

“ Why, miss, dear, that's a funny question ! Since his father died—God rest his soul !—two years ago, isn't he Conroy of Lismoyle ?—‘ The O'Conroy,’ to give him his real title.”

“ And does he live here ? ”

“ An' where else, miss ? ” rejoined Bessie, making a dive at the peacock, and driving him before her.

“ But my aunt never mentioned him ! ” objected the visitor.

“ She didn't. Now do ye tell me that ! Well, well, to be sure. The poor lady has a shocking memory ; but I'm surprised that she overlooked Mr. Niel, for he's not one to be forgotten or shoved aside in a hurry,” and then as if to herself—“ however much he is put upon, and tormented ! ”

“ And so Captain Conroy is my aunt's step-son ? ”

“ Oh, yes. She's his step-mother right enough. You see, it was like this, miss,” and Bessie, who loved talking, laid a confidential hand upon the mahogany banister. “ The master was lonesome in this great big house, after the mistress died ; and no wonder. She was just a miracle of beauty and goodness, beloved by rich and poor ; and Mrs. Sangster, a young widow with one little girl, came along to stay near by. She

was mortal pretty and enticin', and gay in herself ; and the poor man thought she would mind the children and keep the house going—and so that's how it fell out."

" Is Captain Conroy married ? " inquired Rhoda—wondering how many more surprises awaited her ?

" Not he ! " with a disdainful gesture. " He shuns the ladies. He has no time to be bothered with them, though dozens are just aching to marry him."

" How embarrassing for him ! "

" Oh, he doesn't notice ! Nothing what you may call embar-asses him. He was just the same as a little boy ; goin' his own way, full of plans and spirits, and tricks. I'm here twenty-seven years come Michaelmas, and I love every hair in his head, so I do ! Madame gives me warning every few days, but I don't take no notice. *My* place is in Lismoyle, and here I'll stop," and Bessie banged her hand upon the banister. Then in a totally different key : " Your tea is in the smoking-room, miss, an' it will be stone cold."

As she spoke, she opened the door of the inner hall, and ushered the visitor into a large room with a penetrating atmosphere of leather and tobacco. It was furnished with huge bookcases, and a roomy writing-table ; there were well-worn arm-chairs, guns, fishing-rods, whips, two new saddles (evidently just unpacked) ; undoubtedly a man's den. " 'Tis the only tidy place we have," resumed Bessie, " and the Captain lets no one in—barrin' the dogs. But I'll take it on

myself to settle you here, miss ; and I'll face him down afterwards—though I'm sure he'll make no objection for *once*."

"I'll promise not to touch anything," replied the girl, with an irony lost on her companion.

"Well now, miss, I'll lave ye. The little China dog will keep ye company. I must go and drive the peacock off to roost: he's getting altogether too impident, and too persevering."

Abandoned to the sole society of Pekoe, the visitor proceeded to make a tour of inspection. Peering into the bookcases she discovered volumes of old encyclopædias, sermons, Scott's novels (early edition), Cuvier's "Animal Kingdom," "Gulliver's Travels," French memoirs, "Jorrocks," racing calendars, and "Ruff's Guide to the Turf." Turning from the books, she noticed a superb old bureau, an almost featureless Turkey carpet, various prints, a number of framed photographs of bungalows, also regimental, and polo groups. Over the fire-place, hung a half-length oil-painting of an officer in old-fashioned cavalry uniform. He had a splendid dark, arresting face, and Rhoda stood gazing at him for an appreciatively long time. Beneath this picture on the chimney-piece, were all sorts of small odds and ends dear to mankind: ash-holders, pipe-cleaners, pipe-cases, a boot-hook, a match-box, a dog-whistle. In the centre was placed an Indian goddess in brass, about eighteen inches in height. She was flanked by two framed photographs: one of a pretty,

smiling girl, the other of a handsome woman of a certain age—with a bold, imperious air. When Rhoda had concluded her inspection, she told herself that she knew all there was to know, about Captain Conroy. (She rather prided herself on her facility in putting two-and-two together.) He had evidently been in India, had possibly played polo and shot big game; was amazingly orderly, a great smoker, fond of animals, not much given to books, and had (whatever Bessie might declare to the contrary) two notable lady friends. Then she anxiously selected the most comfortable chair, searched for a cushion, and footstool, invited Pekoe to her lap, and sat down to review her first day in Ireland.

She was now acquainted with the home of the Conroys, their belongings, retainers, and dogs; but, amazing and remarkable fact, had not yet come face to face with one of the family. It was all rather like the story of "The Three Bears!" With this idea in her head, and fatigued by a long journey and many new experiences, "the young lady from London" nodded and nodded, and presently fell fast asleep.

CHAPTER VII

NIEL CONROY—whom his step-mother had omitted to mention—was thirty years of age and the owner of Lismoyle—a heritage perilously near to its dark moment of eclipse. Most of the property—that is to say, the farms—had been sold under the Land Act, and Lismoyle was now shrunk to nine hundred acres, indifferently enclosed by the dilapidated walls of the demesne. Once upon a time, none had held his head higher than “O’Conroy of Lismoyle,” chief of an ancient Celtic clan, proud, hospitable, quarrelsome, and brave. After a reasonably long season of prosperity, the usual reaction (that is to say, the decline of the family) set in. It was slow, but steady; sojourns in London and Paris, racing, gambling, and keeping open house, swallowed up thousands, and the lamentable years of the famine, completed what extravagance had begun. The Conroys were a notably handsome race. Niel’s grandfather, whose face proved his fortune, married an heiress, and her dower had averted a disastrous crisis. Unfortunately “Beauty” Conroy died in his early

thirties, and was succeeded by an amiable, weak-willed son, Denis, the father of Niel and his sister Bryda. Their mother, the belle of the county, full of spirit, energy and graciousness, was clever and far-seeing. She stimulated her naturally indolent husband to surprising exertions; composed his business letters, and gave him wise advice. Besides this, she looked after her household, her garden, and her poor; but in nursing a maid through deadly typhus she contracted the fever herself, and died at the early age of seven-and-twenty, very sincerely mourned. For two years her husband was inconsolable, and then he married—as Bessie had described—a pretty, light-hearted young widow, with one child. The poor, deluded man hoped that this gay, good-tempered bride—a woman of family too—would be a kind mother to his orphan children, cheer his despondency, and manage his home. But the second Madame Conroy had no taste for humdrum domesticity, or the faintest conception of housekeeping, economy, authority, or time. The widow of an impecunious army captain, was enchanted to find herself the mistress of Lismoyle. She entertained her neighbours right royally; radiant in charming toilettes, and with a new pair of carriage horses, she scoured the country, attending every dance, picnic, or garden-party, within miles.

As Denis Conroy did not care for society, he remained at home, and soon found himself almost as lonely as ever; with respect to the children and

household—they were left to take care of themselves as best they might! Madame was irresponsible, impulsive and flighty—more like a girl in her teens, than a woman who had been twice married; and it was whispered among his acquaintances, with bated breath, that poor Denis Conroy had made a terrible mistake. The new wife was pretty—with respect to her looks, there could be no two opinions—but she was a chattering, empty-headed, pleasure-seeking, fool! Ultimately old family friends came to the front with advice and assistance; secured a nursery governess for the two little girls, and sent the boy to a good preparatory school.

Twice a year, Niel returned home for his holidays, full of happy and eager anticipations. He was already a capital rider, and, for his age, a fair shot. He dearly loved every stick and stone at Lismoyle, and rode, or tramped about with his father all day long. These were real holidays for Denis Conroy, who was pathetically proud of his handsome, clever, lad; and Niel was so completely engrossed with the delights of existence, and living chiefly out of doors, that he failed to notice his untidy home, and Madame's slipshod, unpunctual, ways. He and his father went shooting, fishing or hunting—according to the season—and generally presented themselves barely in time for a late dinner—a habit that found favour with the mistress of the house. As years went on, and Niel passed from Harrow to Sandhurst, he could not help noticing a woeful change in his parent. He

had become so strangely dull and silent, especially of an evening ; and was not nearly so keen about sport as formerly. Still, he always had a pleasant word or look for his boy, and repeatedly said : " Niel, remember that you are a real Conroy. Never forget *that*, my son ! " When he was eighteen, Niel was gazetted to a cavalry regiment in South Africa—in the last year of the Boer War. The night before he left home, his father took him into the smoking-room and gave him fifty pounds.

" I wish it were more," he said, with a trembling lip, " but somehow or other I'm always short of cash. Well, now, my dear boy, you are going out into the great world—a world I've only read about—and God knows, if you and I will ever meet again ! If you are spared, you will rule here some day, and make a far better master, than I have done. Yes, you have your mother's pluck and energy. Her death, I may say, put an end to *me*."

The lad listened with an awestruck expression, as his father continued :

" Ever since the day the vault in the hollow closed over her, I have fallen into melancholy and indolence, my two besetting failings. Sometimes my head feels queer, and I don't seem inclined to move or to speak, and although I'm only fifty, I feel and look like an old man—a cumberer of the ground ! "

" Oh, Dad, how can you talk such rot ! " protested his son. " All you want is a good bit of change. You ought to get away from Lismoyle for a while, and go

over to England, and maybe on to Switzerland—or take a sea voyage. You’ve not been out of this place for years.”

“No. I’ll stay here as long as I live, and here, as you know, we are buried. I sit and smoke, and think, and doze—an idle man, wishing great things—and doing nothing. It’s as if I were under a sort of fairy spell, and had completely lost my will-power. But you, Niel,” laying a hand on his shoulder, “will make up for me, and I charge you to look after your sister, and to hold on to Lismoyle, as long as there is a stone left.”

* * * * *

The boy’s first service was a strenuous year in South Africa ; but he was healthy, hardy and keen ; a capital rider, and clever at handling horses,—broken or otherwise. Subsequently his regiment went to the East, where he exchanged into the Indian army, and remained out there for years—being, so to speak, purse-bound. His allowance was so scanty and uncertain, he could never afford to go home. Indeed, it was all he could do, to keep out of the hands of the *soucars*, and make both ends meet. Yet he was not forgotten at Lismoyle—save and except where money was concerned.—He received long letters from his sister, who was at school, and many pages from his step-mother, full of flippant gossip and chatter ; complaints of hard times, and playful requests for embroidery, muslins, furs, and jewellery. These

letters came but fitfully ; sometimes by every mail ; then they would cease for many months. Now and again, he welcomed the local paper—addressed by his father, or a short, almost illegible scrawl, telling him a few details about the place and the people. One of these scrawls had an underscored postscript, which said : “ Niel, we are going downhill fast.”

Presently these scrawls ceased, and he was informed by Madame, in a long, untidy letter, that his father's ill-health had, as was feared, developed into softening of the brain—a hopeless case—and that she and Sullivan (a sharp individual, half steward, half agent) were now managing the property between them.

N.B.—From this time forth, his pitiful, meagre allowance, came to an end.

Two years previously, Denis Conroy had passed away, and his son was summoned to take his place as head of the family. He returned to Lismoyle, to find mortgages, debts, and chaos. It was ten years since Niel had been home—those ten years that make the deepest mark on a man's life. He had left Lismoyle a boy ; he returned a man, who had knocked about the world, had known sickness, privation, fighting, and had put in eight years' service in one of the smartest cavalry regiments in the north of India. Here, his memories of South Africa, the dusty veldt, the dead horses, the empty ration-tins, faded. India threw her glamour over Niel Conroy. His hungry craving for Ireland was gradually weakened by her spell. Besides this, he found congenial work, and

congenial comrades ; the delights of polo, racing and shooting ; blissful excursions into the jungle, and even into far Cashmere. And it was not merely India who seduced him, but Ireland who thrust him from her,—for of late years, there had been no hint of recall, or any definite wish for his presence.

The old man still survived, helpless and unconscious ; and even if his son had run home on three months' leave, of what avail ? since his father would be totally unable to recognize him. So Niel remained in the Punjaub, where his good looks, his happy disposition, fine, generous character, and admirable horsemanship, made him many friends. When in full uniform, mounted on a spirited black charger, he presented an arresting and chivalrous figure ; his commanding blue eyes, matched his dark blue pugaree, and he carried himself like a sovereign. Yet Conroy was not merely a young man, with an attractive personality, but a smart and efficient officer, a prime favourite with his men, who were unaffectedly proud of his prowess on racecourse, and polo-ground, and flung him many a " Shabash ! "

* * * * *

Distance had lent enchantment to his birthplace ; and as Martin, the old retainer, drove him from Doonbeg, Niel's heart—though saddened by the end of that life in death—beat with a pleasurable anticipation of beholding his beloved home. Ever since he had been able to run about, he had been deeply attached to

Lismoyle,—precisely as if it were some sentient thing. But what was this? When the dog-cart was pulled up at the gates, the lodge was empty, the avenue moss-grown and strewn with fallen branches; whirling clouds of withered leaves, seemed to whisper to the new master, that a sore disappointment awaited him in the home that loomed out through the humid grey dusk. He found his father's widow tearful and emotional; her good looks undimmed, and even emphasized, by fashionable and becoming mourning. Her daughter Dorothea, or "Doatie," had developed into a tall, discontented young woman, with a beautiful skin, reddish hair, a slack mouth, and a willowy form. His sister Bryda—who gave him an enthusiastic welcome—was a true Conroy, with all the family's dark good looks; cheerful, active, self-possessed, and evidently the backbone of the establishment.

The morning after his arrival, Niel went round the premises accompanied by his sister. It proved a most melancholy excursion. He had never been so sanguine as to expect improvements; but on the other hand, he was not prepared for ruin. His first visit was to the garden, which had evidently been abandoned to its fate. The walks were almost obliterated in grass and moss; the box borders were gigantic. The door of the empty greenhouse was gone—this had been taken for firewood. What had been his mother's cherished "rosery," was now a mass of briars, thistles, and yellow rag-weed. As for the orchard, it was

unapproachable; the trees standing amid a fastness of menacing thorns, dense undergrowth, and acrid nettles.

Niel Conroy's bronze face looked almost grey, as he turned to his sister, and said: "Bry, why did you not let me know of this? I suppose it's a specimen of the whole place?"

Bryda nodded, and met his gaze with tears brimming in her beautiful, expressive, eyes.

"I," dashing them away as she spoke, "knew no more than you did till I came home three weeks ago. You see, I have always lived with Aunt Grace—for Madame said that father being such a hopeless invalid, and recognizing no one, this was no home for *me*, and that I should really be rather in the way, than otherwise."

"But Madame remained here herself," argued her brother. "She generally wrote from Lismoyle."

"She wrote, yes," the girl hesitated for a moment; "I had better tell you the truth, Niel. She wrote on Lismoyle notepaper, but she really lived at the Southern Hotel in Dublin. I believe she came down here now and then for a couple of days, but it was Martin and Bessie, who looked after father." Her lip quivered as she added: "Sometimes, I think—now, when it is too late—that perhaps father was not so completely lost to everything as was supposed. Oh, Niel! Just imagine him sitting there, day after day, year after year, in his chair by the window, looking out on the demesne, unable to move, or read,

or write, absolutely cut off from the whole world, and maybe wondering *why* he had been deserted? Niel, sometimes at night this thought comes, and stabs me like a knife, and I cannot sleep for crying," and great tears splashed down upon her cheap, black gown.

"Don't, don't, Bry," said her brother soothingly. "You were always a good daughter, you and I know that."

"No, I ought to have been here with him; I feel sure of it now. But Aunt Grace dislikes Madame so much, that she always threw obstacles in my way. And how was father to know, that I was unable to come? No, not till near the end; and then I was too late—he had gone."

"It was I, that should have returned," declared Niel passionately; "I, instead of soldiering and enjoying myself out in India. I was a selfish brute! Well, well, what's done, is done. Don't cry any more, Bry. You have no occasion for remorse; for you were not your own mistress. Now let us continue this ghastly business, and inspect the yard. Tell me all about Sullivan?"

"But he was here before you left. You know him."

"Yes, a thin, foxy-faced man, with his hat over his eyes. A tremendous talker, and said to be a good judge of stock."

"I believe he had everything in his hands, land, and crops, and stock. Madame trusted him altogether. She just signed the cheques. Sullivan dismissed the old gardener, and most of the servants, and cut down

all expenses. I really cannot imagine what became of the money that was saved in this way?" and she drew a long breath. "The house bills are awful—unpaid for ages—and Bessie has had no wages for two years." As Bryda made this statement, she opened the door, and they stepped into the yard.

The yard was a vast enclosure, surrounded by stabling, barns and sheds; paved with cobble-stones, thickly overgrown with grass. Some of the outhouses had large gaps in their roofs; a collection of rusty and broken farm implements lay underneath an open shed, and there was no living thing to be seen, but a brown milch goat, and a large flock of consequential ducks. The stables discovered one thin old horse, and from the harness-room a handsome grey-haired man, who was cleaning Niel's boots, ran out brush in hand.

"Good mornin' to ye, Master Niel, and good luck!" he said.

"Good-morning, Martin; but I don't see much sign of luck!"

"Well, no. 'Tis a poor home-coming, so it is! The whole place being racked out, and all to pieces. Ye see, the master being terribly failed the last six years, and so weak in the head—he was teetotally helpless."

"That's true, Martin; and your kindness to him, is about the only good thing I can look back on," said Conroy, with suppressed emotion.

"Sure, wasn't he me own foster brother, and weren't we both reared (with respect to you, Miss Bryda) at

the same breast? He was always a good friend to me, from the time we were boys up, and when your mother was alive—God rest her soul! And after she went, the poor man made a shocking bad hand of himself, so he did,” and Martin nodded his head with grave significance as he added: “and it just broke his heart. He had lost his memory for a good long time; aye, Miss Bryda, and his mind too. At first, he’d sort of ye may call ‘flashes’; and now and then he’d bring out all Master Niel’s letters, and get me to read them over, maybe five or six times; and then he’d sigh, and ask: ‘When will they be in, Martin? They’re a long time.’ Then his mind would darken—like the moon behind a cloud—and for the last three or four years it was as black as night. Betimes Madame would come down for a day or two, but he never knew her. Sometimes he took her for a housemaid; but mostly for the divil himself; and he would shout, and shake his stick, and drive her out of the room. Just before the end, a glint of his senses come back, and he knew Bessie and me; and he called for your mother—her name was his last word. Now don’t take on, Miss Bryda,” turning to the girl, whose tears were falling. “Ye were best out of it. Sure, it was only once, maybe, in a year he’d have his mind for half an hour; and what good was that, to him, or anyone? I’m afraid you find the place in a cruel state, Master Niel?”

“Yes, the gardens are a wilderness. I suppose there’s no stock on the land?”

"Not a hoof."

"Nor shooting?"

"Not a feather! I name no names—but someone has feathered his nest in grand style."

"But what has become of all the money?" asked Bryda.

"Give me an easier question, my heart. If ye ask Sullivan, it was Madame had it and spent it. If ye ask Madame, it was Sullivan took the lot. I know he'll be coming up to moider ye, Master Niel, with his books, and his accounts, and his gabby talk, and explanations."

"I'll send for him at once."

"Oh, yes, ye may send for him, but ye'll never be able to dale with him, when it comes to lies and figures. He can make black white, and prove anything; but there's one thing certain—there'll be no money for ye. Well, now, Master Niel, ye're a grand young man, it's proud I am to see ye, and the very spit of the old gentleman in the smoking-room. Sir, I hope to God ye'll stick to Lismoyle!"

"Yes, Martin, I'll give you my hand on that. I'll stick to Lismoyle, as long as Lismoyle will stick to me."

At this moment Bessie came hurrying into the yard to say "There was a fellow at the hall door, who swore he wouldn't stir a toe until he had seen the Captain." The fellow, proved to be the local butcher, with an unpaid bill, extending over a period of three years.

CHAPTER VIII

THE newly arrived master of Lismoyle, did not encounter his step-mother for several days after their first meeting. She was supposed to be confined to her room with maddening neuralgia, and Bessie brought him piteous little bulletins, and tender messages, with a scornful, unbelieving face. Meanwhile he *did* see the house, and its damp walls,—with wide spaces where pictures had been and were not. Many fine old prints, and pieces of rare French furniture had been mysteriously removed—possibly while the invalid owner, sitting in his arm-chair, looked on unconscious and powerless.

“I believe they were seized for debt,” murmured Bryda; “so Bessie thought, but I am not sure. A foreign-looking man came on a car, inquiring for old prints, old silver, or old furniture, and assured Martin that he had an order to view from Madame Conroy; and in spite of the combined efforts of Bessie and Martin, he wormed himself into the house, and carried away a quantity of things from the drawing-room, and said that he would return. But Bessie stored most of the treasures in the garrets, and when she

next met his greedy eyes, she told him that everything belonged to *you*, and that if he showed his nose inside the doors, she should set the dogs on him ! ”

“ Well ? ” ejaculated her brother.

“ Well, he was furious, and swore that he had Madame’s instructions, and declared that he was a creditor ; and that if Bessie didn’t mind herself, he would put in bailiffs. However, he never returned, and when Madame came back with a long list, and was busy marking off things, Bessie got the Rector to speak to her, and tell her that she must cable out to you for permission to dispose of the Conroy heirlooms.”

“ There will have to be some explanation and reckoning for all this,” said Niel. “ The place has been allowed to go to rack and ruin. The house has been pillaged—and I mean to know the reason why ! ”

“ Madame always says, she has no head for money—and it’s only too true. She muddles it away, and forgets to pay her bills. She *never* thinks.”

Niel recalled a vision of his boyhood—a pretty step-mother, all smiles and hand-kissing, driving away from the door ; whilst his father ruefully looked after a pair of horses, so urgently wanted in the hay-field. He also remembered his expression of blank misery, as sheaves of significant envelopes were dealt out to him from the post-bag. The truth was only too evident—his step-mother had squandered, the steward had swindled—and hence a heritage of ruin and debt. Summoned to give an account of his

stewardship, Sullivan presented himself in the smoking-room with a beaming face, and enthusiastic accost. Compliments and congratulations were rained down upon Captain Conroy, but he waved them aside and curtly requested Mr. Sullivan "to get to business." Mr. Sullivan's effervescing joy fell miserably flat. He was sorely disappointed in the new owner of Lismoyle; he had looked for a nice, jovial, happy-go-lucky young officer, ready to listen to, and believe, all his lies about "bad times," and only too eager to raise another mortgage! But here was a hard-headed, practical fellow, not a bit like his idea of a cavalry officer. A young man, with a pair of fierce blue eyes, and a stern mouth full of awkward questions, who turned over pages, read and compared entries, made notes in pencil, demanded receipts, and actually begged leave to see Madame's power of attorney, and bank-book!

Undoubtedly the new owner was out for trouble, and if he wanted a fight, he should have it! Long plausible tales, and extravagant excuses, were received with chilling inattention. Captain Conroy was death on facts!

"Admitting," he said, "that the cattle had died, the oats and turnips failed one year, what of the next? Why should the land of Lismoyle be worse than its neighbours?"

"I can tell you that, sir," responded Sullivan, lowering his voice to an awed whisper. "Sure, it's well known, that nothing thrives here. There's a '*Meah*' on the place!"

"A what?"

"Well, then, a curse. There's no denying it."

"Nonsense! Damned nonsense!" rejoined Conroy. "Look here, can you tell me why thirty ton of bone manure is entered twice over within ten days? And where are the receipts for the money? I notice that part of the demesne has been let for grazing for the last three years, but I see no entry of any payment."

Sullivan immediately burst into voluble explanations. He talked of wages, taxes, repairs (the roof had run into thousands!), and endeavoured to befog and entangle the soldier in the intricacies of columns of untidy figures. But he had to do with an inquisitor, who had a clear head, a taste for mathematics, and who declined to allow that five and four make twelve.

Finally, Conroy abandoned the hopeless task of unravelling a maze of blotted figures, complications, corrections, and erasures, and, counselled by Bryda, called in a clever local solicitor, and the "reckoning" continued for days. The more closely the business was examined, the more disgraceful and scandalous the defalcations appeared. Questioned as to large sums of money which seemed to have evaporated, Sullivan took shelter behind *Madame*. Speaking with fiery eloquence, and wrathful indignation, he declared that there was no end to her ruinous calls upon the place. He could show that—could prove it in black and white—and didn't everyone know, how she lived at a grand hotel in Dublin, and wasted the

earnings of Lismoyle in shameless extravagance? Money just ran through her hands like water and——

"Leave Madame Conroy out of it!" sternly interrupted her step-son.

"But it can't be done, Captain! You ask Mrs. Mahony. You ask Mrs. Donovan. She gave dinners and dances——"

"That's enough," broke in Conroy. "I'm squaring accounts with *you*."

"That's true, and the accounts are correct," stormed Sullivan, "and if you go into them fairly, you will do me justice; you will see two hundred here, five hundred there, and big cheques goin' like clockwork every week! Well, if you don't believe me, ye have only to look at the bank account."

This was indisputable! When at first Sullivan became agent and manager for the property, matters had run smoothly enough; but year after year, they had gradually changed from bad to worse; temptation proved too strong for Sullivan. Madame's methods were slack; she figuratively left the reins on his neck, and weak human nature made the most of an unrivalled opportunity. He was a cunning, unscrupulous scoundrel—possibly had he had someone to overlook him, he might have remained merely a greedy, but fairly honest individual. Unfortunately Madame's laxity had been his ruin. He lived in a small, humble sort of house, kept one pony and a shabby little gig, and made no *show*; on the contrary, he craftily posed as a poor man, for fear of

exciting envious questions—but he had invested large “*savings*” in America.

After a week of discussion, explanations, and protestations; culminating in violent language, table-thumping, and desperate threats on the part of Mr. Sullivan, his books were impounded, and he only escaped arrest and conviction, by a hasty trip to New York, via Queenstown.

“There’s no use in following him and prosecuting,” commented the local adviser. “It would be only throwing good money after bad, and there’s none to spare. He has sucked the place dry. In forty years’ experience, I have never come across anything like it!”

He recommended the raising of another mortgage, which would enable Captain Conroy to pay off pressing debts, put the house and stables in water-tight repair, and invest the balance in stock. “That is,” he added, “if you mean to stay?”

“Oh, yes, I shall stay,” replied the young man with decision, “and try and pull things together.”

(The previous night, he had paced the avenue for hours, endeavouring to face facts—the change in his life, the loss involved—and to make plans. He had a year’s leave from India. When that had expired, he must give up the service, and devote himself to reclaiming Lismoyle: a heavy task for a man without capital, and hampered by a spendthrift step-mother.)

“I intend to go in for breaking and selling horses,” he said. “Horses are just the one thing I know something about, and as soon as you can find

me the money, I will repair the stables, and do my best to fill them."

Madame kept her room for a whole week, and then, hearing that the great Sullivan tempest was overpast, and that he had fallen, and fled, disgraced; she descended, and resumed her place in the family circle.

Kathleen Conroy, naturally a moral coward, was not in the least afraid of Niel,—although he *had* seen her bank-book! She remembered him as an easy-going, animated, amusing boy, and they had always been good friends.

She entered the smoking-room one evening, with a little gold bag on her arm, containing bills.

"Yes, my neuralgia has departed," she announced, "but my poor dear nerves are so easily upset, and money worries and anxieties are so bad for me. My heart is not strong. For years I have lived a hand-to-mouth existence, and I should never be surprised, if I had a serious nervous breakdown."

"I hope there's no fear of that," said Conroy, gravely eyeing the pretty, wonderfully young-looking woman, who sat at the other side of the writing-table.

"I hear you have dismissed Sullivan," she continued, "and I'm delighted. Latterly I suspected him of cheating. I know he let the grazing, and never paid a halfpenny of the rent; and he ran up frightful bills at his cousin's shop at Kilbeggan, and ordered quantities of things that were never delivered or wanted—but were charged for, of course. I believe he made thousands one way or another, but I wasn't

clever enough to deal with him. You see, I was not much here, and when I did come, I felt so broken-hearted at your poor father's condition, that I really could not remain. And naturally it was an impossible home for Doatie or Bryda."

Niel listened with polite attention, but made no reply. Then, leaning towards him with an air of affectionate confidence, she continued :

"I want to have a little *money* talk with you, dear boy," and producing a thick roll of bills, she handed them across the table. "Will you settle these for me? You see, I never formally drew my jointure" (she had spent ten times the amount), "and as soon as we may lighten our mourning, I hope you will get a motor; it is really a necessity in the country. The girls must go out, and take their proper place in society."

All the time she was speaking, she little dreamed of the raging storm that was rising in the breast of her *vis-à-vis*.

It appeared to him, that this pretty, fluffy-haired woman, with her pleading eyes, and pointed chin, represented the evil genius of the family!

"I'm afraid the girls' place will be in the poor-house—as far as I can see. These bills of yours," thrusting them towards her, "come to over two hundred pounds.—I have no money to meet them."

"But you have the place!" she protested. "Dear boy, *you* have everything now!" and she produced a tiny handkerchief, and held it to her eyes.

"The place is almost worthless," he answered in a harsh voice, "thanks to the swindling and squandering that has gone on for seven years."

Then in a few sharp sentences, he drew an outline of her mad expenditure, and of Sullivan's enormous defalcations. He touched upon her notorious extravagance, the sale of valuable heirlooms,—her criminal neglect of house, and property. Madame was thunderstruck by his accusation. She felt as if his blazing blue eyes had scorched her, and shrank back in her chair, burying her face in her hands, amazed, and trembling.

To think that Niel of all people, Niel,—whom she still looked on as a dear boy in his teens,—should speak to her in this heartless, bitter, brutal, fashion! Although fury and resentment boiled and bubbled in his veins, Conroy kept himself in check, and did not forget that the lady cowering behind her handkerchief was his father's widow. Presently, recovering from her state of collapse, she plucked up sufficient courage to throw the entire blame upon Sullivan.

"She was no business woman," she whimpered; "she had trusted the wretch absolutely—that was her *great* fault—trusting other people. As for extravagance——"

"That must end," broke in Niel sternly. "I shall have to work hard to keep a roof over my head. I intend to go in for horse-dealing, and the most rigid economy."

As the ultimate result of this painful interview,

Madame and Doatie were persuaded to spend a year with some distant relatives, leaving Bryda to help her brother to set his house in order, recover the garden, and endeavour to restore the estate.

At first the task seemed hopeless. What dust and mildew, and cobwebs! What weeds, and nettles, and brambles! What rags, and breakages, and debts! Nevertheless the two Conroys slaved with a will, and gradually effected a clearance. Parasites who hung about the back door,—and fed their pigs and poultry from the kitchen—were summarily scattered. The coal-shed was supplied with a lock and key. Also, the yard gate. And although the Captain and Miss Conroy got a bad name for “shocking maneness,” and being “a pair of Jews,” the village shop was paid; also the baker and butcher—whose accounts had been running for years. Labouring men were set to clear the yard, and the avenue. The stables were repaired, and tenanted. Bryda painted the greenhouse and papered two rooms with her own hands, made loose covers for the drawing-room, and nursed back to health, many forlorn, and forgotten plants.

By and by the neighbours came to call, and were agreeably surprised by the change in Lismoyle. The avenue had been weeded, shrubs and creepers pruned; the hall door had received a coat of paint, and the drawing-room, so long closed, looked cheerful and pretty. The two young people had worked wonders, and were a decided acquisition to society. Bryda resembled her mother; but her brother did

not take after poor old Denis. He was more like his great-grandfather—a slight, upstanding fellow, with the jet-black hair, dark blue eyes, and the fine, keen face of his ancestors. Captain Conroy did not seem inclined for balls or dinner-parties. He even declined to be “detailed” for cricket, and declared that he had no time for amusement; but he was a prominent figure in the hunting-field, a consummate horseman, and always admirably mounted.

At the end of a year Madame and Doatie once more descended on Lismoyle. The former returned as pretty, as restless, and as flighty as ever. It was impossible to be seriously angry with such an affectionate, demonstrative, irresponsible creature! Remonstrances had precisely the same effect on Madame as thumping a down pillow. Niel received her politely—nay, generously—and never once alluded to that drastic interview in the smoking-room. Madame was popular, especially with the young people in the neighbourhood, being always so ready—indeed, eager—to “get up anything.” From a jumble sale to a fancy ball, nothing came amiss to her, and her intense superficial gaiety, follies, and makeshifts, were applauded and laughed at, by those who had not to suffer in comfort, or in purse.

Quite recently a relative had left Madame Conroy a nice little legacy, which she immediately dispersed in her own lavish fashion. She purchased a prize Pekinese for Bryda, a diamond bandeau for Doatie, a silver-mounted suit-case for Niel, and—presuming

that her step-son would provide chauffeur and petrol—a superior Panhard laudaulette for herself! She declared that now the girls were out, a car was as much a necessity as a chair to sit upon. Why, Lydia Donovan had two, and a runabout!

But alas! Niel proved inexorable, and assured his step-mother he was totally unable to provide a chauffeur. None of his men could drive a car, and anyway, he had not a man to spare. Meanwhile the Panhard, well wrapped up and cared for, enjoyed a long holiday in the coach-house.

For a considerable time there had been a most blessed respite from Madame's "surprises."—The Panhard was the last.—But there was no knowing what extraordinary idea might suddenly enter her empty head; fortunately, just now purchases were out of the question, as recently on a postcard to Bryda, her step-mother had described herself as "*a penniless beggar!*" (a piece of news that, when read aloud in Doonbeg Post Office, excited the liveliest interest). It would have been an unspeakable relief to brother and sister, if the volatile lady had set up her tent, and made a little home of her own, elsewhere. Her jointure was generous—and, indeed, a heavy drag on Niel's resources,—but Madame had a horror of a small house—perhaps a villa!—with a humiliating lack of "county" society. She accepted her jointure, yet remained an immovable fixture: as she thoroughly appreciated the prestige of her position, in being "Madame Conroy of Lismoyle!"

CHAPTER IX

CAPTAIN CONROY had put in two strenuous days at a distant horse fair, and returned home tired, hungry, and not a little depressed. He had sold a couple of hunters, but the pick of the stable, on which he had placed high hopes, had been lamed on the journey, and was now limping up from Doonbeg.

It was after six o'clock when he drove into the yard, and entered the smoking-room attended by Freddy. As he stood for a moment, pulling off his driving-gloves, it occurred to him that there was something unusual about the room. He noticed a tea-tray on the writing-table, and over the back of his own especial chair, a bunch of shining brown hair! Yes, and on the floor the tail of a white skirt! Cautiously and deliberately he moved round, and beheld, to his astonishment, an absolutely unknown young woman,—who was fast asleep. Her face rested on a slim hand. Pekoe, wide awake, reposed luxuriously in her lap (and greeted his master with what might be interpreted as a dog's "glad eye"), a pair of remarkably pretty feet, rested on the reversed paper basket.

Conroy stood, and critically surveyed the unconscious stranger. She looked pale and thin, her lashes were long, but her nose was much too short; decidedly no beauty! He knew enough about dress, to realize that her simple frock was expensive; round her throat was a string of fine pearls—presumably real; for a young lady who wore such delicate silk stockings, and smart silver shoes, was not likely to have a taste for sham jewellery.

Who was this fashionable incognita? Could she be the latest and most painful of all Madame's surprises? Possibly the insistence of his gaze was disturbing, for the girl moved, sighed, awoke, and finally sat erect. Her eyes proved to be brown—very bright and lively—and these found themselves confronted by a tall, broad-shouldered young man in a light driving-coat. He had ink-black hair, deep blue eyes, a tanned skin, and was quite startlingly handsome!

"Ah, so someone has arrived at last!" she said, rising slowly, and discovering a slender figure, and a charming smile. "I began to think this house had no inhabitants—I've been all alone since two o'clock."

Conroy concealed his amazement with commendable restraint, and muttered something about being "sorry."

"Yes, but you look as if you didn't expect to see me!"

"Well—er—the fact is—er——"

"But surely Auntie told you I was coming over?"

"Aunt!" he repeated incredulously. "Do you mean Madame Conroy?"

She answered with a smiling nod. The effect of this nod, was an instant and awe-struck silence. At last he found his voice:

"Well, now that I think of it, she did say something a little while ago about inviting her English niece on a visit."

As he concluded, he deliberately divested himself of his coat, and laid it down.—Anything for a moment's time to enable him to get a grip of this unparalleled situation.

"Yes?" said the girl interrogatively.

"But," now boldly confronting her, "I threw cold water on the idea."

What brutal rudeness! Miss Kyle felt precisely as if a bucket of cold water had been dashed over her, and suddenly sat down. After an instant's obvious hesitation, Captain Conroy took the chair opposite, and resumed:

"Not, I assure you, from any want of hospitality—but merely to save you from a wild-goose chase."

He paused, and glanced over at the pale stranger, who, with her lips pressed together, was surveying him gravely.

"The truth is," he went on, "this is no place for a young lady accustomed to London and luxury. I said so—and I thought that was the end of the matter!"

"No; for as you see, here I am!"

"Then all I can say is, that I'm profoundly sorry for you, Miss——"

"Kyle—Rhoda Kyle."

"Well, then, Miss Kyle, when you have seen our *ménage* and surroundings, you will wish yourself back at home."

"But at present I have no home," was the staggering announcement. "I live with an aunt, and we travel a good deal. Next month, she and a party, are going round the world, and most unexpectedly the doctor forbade me to accompany them. He said I had led too racketsy a life, and prescribed country air and rest, so when Aunt Kathleen offered to take me in—I accepted."

"I wonder if she prepared you for the fact that we are an impoverished Irish family, making no effort to conceal our condition, and living at the back of God speed?"

All this was the reverse of encouraging. This young man excited Rhoda's anger, and roused her spirit of combat and opposition.

"I see that you wish me to remove myself," she remarked, in a voice direct from the polar regions.

"No, no, no. Please don't look at things in the wrong light. I assure you, I am only thinking of *you*."

"Oh, then in that case, pray set your mind at rest. I am delighted with what I've seen of Lismoyle."

And what an extraordinary, downright individual; anxious that she should depart—for all his smooth excuses! From pure contrariness, she was resolved

to remain! Nothing less than an explosion, or a fire, should dislodge her. After all, she said to herself, this was her aunt's house. Her aunt had given her a warm invitation! She was to pay five guineas a week, would be no trouble, and very little expense. If she was uncomfortable, it would be her own affair, and not that, of the officious individual who was so solicitous with respect to her. She felt intensely curious, to see more of this extraordinary establishment; such experiences as hers were surely rare, and her good-looking, outspoken *vis-à-vis*, was also out of the common.

"My step-mother is the most warm-hearted and impulsive of women," he explained. "On the spur of the moment, she has invited you over, and has (as is not unusual) totally forgotten her guest."

"There you are mistaken," replied the girl sweetly. "Bessie, the nice housekeeper—whom I astonished as much as I did you—told me that I was expected this day week. There has been some muddle—for I fixed upon to-day."

Conroy surveyed this cool, self-possessed London girl in helpless silence—her pose, her slim elegance, her bright, rather mischievous, eyes, and her attitude of triumphant composure. What was he to do with her? She seemed to have established herself as mistress of the situation. Mistress or not, he was master of the house, and he resolved that ultimately, if not immediately, she must "pass on." After an appreciable pause, he asked:

"How did you get here?"

"By a most original conveyance," and she gave a lively description of her ride to the cross-roads.

"We walked the remainder of the way. The dogs were very nice to us."

"I'm glad of that," he replied; "but who do you mean by *us*?"

"Only my maid and I."

"Your maid," he repeated. To judge by his intonation, undoubtedly the maid was the very last straw.

"Oh, yes, I've always had one," she answered airily. "It's such a bother to pack, and do one's own hair. And all my frocks fasten up the back."

"How long does it take to go round the world?" he inquired irrelevantly.

The girl's eyes twinkled. She had read his thoughts.

"Jules Verne put it at eighty days," she answered; "but I think our party will be away till April."

Apparently it took him a few minutes to rally from this announcement, then he glanced at his watch, and rose, saying:

"I hope Bessie will look after you. Anyway, she'll do her best. It's about time to dress for dinner—we dine at half-past seven."

As he concluded, he walked to the door, and held it formally open, until, gracefully and leisurely, Miss Kyle had passed out, and preceded him up the shallow staircase.

When Rhoda arrived at her own room, she sat down

on the bed, and resting her elbows on her knees rocked to and fro with laughter. Her aunt's stepson, so painfully, so glaringly, anxious to get rid of her! It was too, too, funny! As a rule, her men friends had been particularly anxious to detain her in their company, and Captain Conroy's attitude was an astonishing novelty. Probably he was a woman-hater; if so, it was too bad of Aunt Kathleen to thrust her on him without warning. And yet—*was* he a woman-hater? He looked so smart and soldierly, and as if he was accustomed to knocking about the world, and mixing with society. As she sat still meditating on the situation, she grew serious; it really was a very awkward corner in which she so unexpectedly found herself—the situation was hateful! Her only resource, was to carry off the affair with a high hand. Presently Parker entered with a dress on her arm.

"Oh, I'm not going to change again," said her mistress; "this will do."

"I'll have to take down your hair, miss. It's all come loose."

"Yes, I've been asleep."

"I understand—ahem!—that Captain Conroy has come home."

"Yes."

"An unmarried gentleman?"

"I believe so, Parker."

"But, Miss Rhoda, what would Mrs. Kyle say, if she knew of you and this Captain Conroy being here all by yourselves?"

"I've wired to my aunt, Madame Conroy, and I expect she will arrive to-morrow."

"Well, if it's a telegram you gave to Bessie, I saw it just now on the billiard-table."

"Dear, dear! What people for forgetting! It shall go the first thing to-morrow, if I have to take it on the milk-cart myself. My aunt can easily be home by dinner-time."

"Maybe Captain Conroy will go away. Bessie was tellin' me that he was terribly shy of ladies."

"Yes. You can put that silver bandeau in my hair, and give me a fan. It's a warm evening. Ah!—there's the gong."

As Conroy ascended to his room, his thoughts, diverted from their usual channel (horseflesh), were exceedingly bitter. *This* was the most cruel of all Madame's "surprises," ten times worse than an unexpected debt. To invite a smart London girl with a pearl necklace and maid, into their poverty stricken home, was absolutely unpardonable. Miserable for the visitor, humiliating for the host. Luxuries and delicacies, such as Miss Kyle was accustomed to, were out of the question, and owing to the unusually dry season, the very water was scarce! As Conroy douched his head, and changed his clothes for a thread-bare dinner-suit, he made up his mind to spare no effort, or artifice, to rid himself of the new arrival—a bright girl certainly, with a ripping figure, but entirely out of the picture at Lismoyle. Already he was terribly handicapped by his step-mother and her

daughter. If he was to be called upon to give a home to Madame's female relatives, there would be no alternative, but emigration to one of the Colonies! He decided to send a line to his wealthy neighbour, Mrs. Donovan, explaining the situation, and imploring her to fetch the visitor as soon as was possible after daybreak. "She will be all right at Rahan," he said to himself, as he gave his hair two final dabs with his brushes. "Maids, motor, men-servants, and Lyddy will be glad to oblige *me*!"

Inspired with this idea, he hurried down to the smoking-room, dashed off a note, then rang the bell, and summoned Bessie to his presence.

"What's the meaning of this, Bess?" he demanded, as soon as she appeared, and he pointed upwards, in the direction of the spare room.

"It's just one of Madame's mistakes," rejoined Bess. "Faix, I've known worse!"

"And I've *not*." And his voice expressed intense annoyance. "I never even heard that Miss Kyle was expected."

"Manin' the young lady—is that so? Well, maybe the mistress was afraid you'd interfere—and put her off."

"Why, of course I would!" he answered forcibly. "You know as well as I do, that this is no place for fashionable visitors."

"That's true! When I first caught sight of the strangers sittin' in the hall, the heart just flew out of me! However, I soon saw that *she* was all right—just

like a child—so friendly with the dogs and the peacock—a real gay, nice-spoken, young girl. When I took her up the hot water in a little can that had 'shaving' on it, I declare she laughed fit to die!"

"She'll *cry* fit to die if she stays on, Bess; and well you know it."

"No, Master Niel, she's not that sort. She's one that takes everything as it comes. It's her maid that is the grandee, and the torment, and heart-scald. Lookin' for wardrobes, her meals upstairs, and askin' for claret—no less! The mistress won't be back till Saturday—and this is Tuesday."

"Well, I won't have Miss Kyle here."

"Why not? What harm will she do ye?"

Conroy drew himself up, then burst into a sudden loud laugh.

"Bessie Kane, for a woman who has been fifty years in the world, you're a poor, simple creature."

"Poor enough, God knows, but not as simple as ye think, Master Niel."

"Tell me, did you ever hear of a Mrs. Grundy?"

"Never to my knowledge. She must be some new-comer. Anyhow, she's not this side of Kilbeggan!"

"*Isn't* she? Suppose I have a young lady staying here alone with me. Don't you think there would be talk?"

"And to be sure there would!" was the prompt reply; "but how is anyone to know? And Madame herself will be here in three days."

"I see I shall have to speak to Father Blake about

you, Bess. Now look here, tell Murphy to saddle Black Monday, and take this note over to Rahan."

"An' is it at this hour?"

"Of course. Ask him to look sharp, and bring an answer. And you might tell your friend the maid that she need not trouble to unpack everything. I shall send her and her mistress, over to Rahan to-morrow morning."

"Niel, you're not in earnest! Sure, wouldn't that be queer sort of manners? and the young lady a visitor!"

"Well, *one* of us must clear out, and I've the oats to cut this week. Hurry off that note, now."

"Yes, I will. And Murphy may as well take the telegram Miss Kyle wrote out for the mistress; but I'd no one to go with it. Last time I give one to Coneen, he dropped it in the avenue, and the peacock destroyed it."

"Yes, yes, send the wire of course; and if dinner is ready, tell Martin to sound the gong."

CHAPTER X

RHODA KYLE and her host (despite of himself) assembled at a round table in the carpetless dining-room, there to discuss a simple but well-served meal. The linen was darned, but spotless: spoons, forks, and salt-cellars were of the real, true and only Irish silver. The glass was "Waterford"; and an old potato ring of great value, piled high with roses, made an original centrepiece. All this occasioned no surprise to the stranger. What did amaze her, was the presence of a fine-looking, elderly man in livery. He was invested in a dark green suit with gold buttons and a scarlet waistcoat, a snow-white head gave the impression of powder; and his upstanding dignity was not beneath that of a royal footman. His name, it appeared, was Martin, and he waited noiselessly and well.

Captain Conroy exerted himself laboriously to talk and entertain his guest; but his manner was restrained, and he brought to his efforts, the deadly politeness that kills all intimacy. Between them they thoroughly threshed out the subject of "the

weather," also the long drought, and the young lady gave her companion a vivid and circumstantial description of her adventures in the train—to which Martin, the butler, listened with subdued but breathless interest.

To hear Miss Kyle's flippant account of her journey by rail and milk-cart, no one would suppose that she realized the unconventionality of her situation. (Although she and her companion had only met within the last hour, a stranger, looking through the open window, might easily have mistaken the couple for husband and wife, who had had a tiff,—since there were long silences, a marked aloofness in their mutual attitude, and a painful consciousness of one another. But Rhoda was a modern young woman, who had travelled far and seen much, and having accidentally stumbled into an enormous social pitfall, was resolved to put a bold face on the matter, and endeavour to ignore her plight.)

As she helped herself to salt, with a delicious pink trout, she thought :

"By rights, I should be upstairs in shame-faced seclusion, dining on tea and toast, instead of hobnobbing with this good-looking Captain Conroy. Oh, what *would* Aunt Char say if she could see us ? "

It was a lovely, warm August evening. The fragrance of flowers and newly-cut hay was in the air ; and a slim young moon peeped timidly over the trees. By the still broad daylight, the girl noticed the shabbiness of her companion's dinner-jacket, the gloss on his

linen, his small, close-set ears, delicately-cut nose—the nostrils thin and haughty—and square, determined jaw. During a somewhat expressive pause; far-away strains stealthily invaded the room—evidently the piper, of the afternoon, was retracing his steps, playing as he went a wistful, melancholy tune—"The Farewell to Patrick Sarsfield." It seemed to float on the air, to grow by gradual degrees fainter, and fainter, then to die away altogether, as if night had absorbed it.

"The Irish pipes," explained Conroy. "I suppose you never heard them. The fellow plays well."

"Yes, I heard him this afternoon, and all the cattle flocked to listen. It looked so strange and uncanny, like something in a fairy-tale."

"This is the country of fairies and fairy-tales. We own a celebrated 'Rath.' No peaches, Martin?" inquired his master abruptly, as a dessert of pears and raspberries was placed on the table.

"No, sir; there's not one fit or ripe."

"But how's that? I saw dozens on Sunday."

"That may be, sir. But some thieves does have a great ambition for peaches!"

"No one goes into the garden, only old Kelly. The gate is always locked at night."

"Yes, sir," assented Martin, but he did not seem inclined to offer any further suggestion.

When he had retired, Rhoda said:

"You may think it extraordinary, Captain Conroy, but *I* can tell you what became of the peaches."

"You can?" he exclaimed, staring at her aghast. Surely this delicate-looking English girl, could not have disposed of three or four dozen peaches—even to wile away the empty hours?

"Yes. This afternoon, when I was strolling round the garden, I came upon an enormous woman in blue. She was eating raspberries, and had a large basket of peaches beside her. I asked her what she was going to do with them?"

Conroy leaned back, and laughed whole-heartedly."

"Well, I must confess, you have astonishing pluck—the courage of ignorance. What did she say?"

"She glared like a wild animal, and told me to mind my own business, and said, that if ever I 'let on' about the peaches, she would knock the head off me. Then she asked me who I was, and when I told her she nearly had a fit. All the same, she stuck to the peaches, and went away growling, with the basket on her arm. I think you ought to know; but please don't give me away, or she may carry out her threat."

"Not likely! The woman in blue is known as a 'holy terror'—or 'Big Jane.' You may wonder why we keep such a monster about the place, and give her employment? Her husband was gardener here, and his father before him! We had a great respect for them both. It was an evil day for Peter Berrigan when he married Jane Morrissey. There is an incredible legend that once she was handsome, and a great singer. She came from somewhere up in the

Galtees, and led him a dog's life; they say she used to beat him. Anyhow, I always think there is something primitive, and savage, about Big Jane! When Peter died and left her with a house full of children, for his sake we tolerated his widow, gave her a cottage and employment—and wink at her failings.”

“What are these, besides theft, and threats?” inquired Rhoda.

“She keeps a little shebeen—that’s a pub on the sly—gives rowdy Sunday dances, and snaps her fingers at me, and also at the priests. They are a tremendous power in this country, I can assure you; but the curate here can make nothing of Big Jane. She rarely goes to Mass; it’s too far, she declares; and if her health were to fail, who is to support her family? As for that, her boys fled years ago. She has one daughter—a widow—and several grandchildren. For all her poor mouth, I believe she’s comfortably off, and has the old-age pension.”

“But surely she isn’t qualified?”

“No. I spoke to her, and said, ‘Jane, you’re not seventy?’ and she replied, ‘That’s no matter. They say I am, and why wouldn’t I take the pension, when it was offered me?’ It’s my opinion that she frightened the inspector into granting it. Anyway, she said he was a nice *soft* man! Shall we make a move into the smoking-room?”

“Yes, I am simply dying for a cigarette.”

Once more in the smoking-room, Miss Kyle drew out a pretty gold case, and said:

"I smoke Egyptians," selecting one with elaborate carelessness.

"My smoke is a pipe!" he replied. "I hope you won't mind?"

"No, indeed. Some day, I think I shall try one myself."

"I'm afraid you will find it will try *you*," he answered with a laugh, as he handed her the matches.

Before Miss Kyle sat down, her attention was attracted by a photograph which hung near the fireplace, and turning to her companion, she said:

"I see that you were in the 50th Bengal Lancers," indicating his portrait with the end of her cigarette.

"Yes," coming over to stand beside her, "that was my regiment for eight good years."

"I daresay you will be surprised when I tell you, that I know several in the group. There is Major Campbell, and Captain Fitzroy, and Captain Lygon and Mr. Lefroy."

"But how did you come across them?"

"Aunt Charlotte and I were in India last winter; the regiment was at Bareilly; we spent six weeks there."

For a moment her companion seemed too amazed to speak, and she went on:

"We know them rather well—I mean, your old regiment—and liked them so much. How splendid they look on parade! I've been to their afternoon 'At Homes,' and to tea-parties at Captain Lygon's bungalow."

"Have you? Lygon and I used to chum together. It was I who started the garden. Fancy you meeting all those fellows, and seeing the regiment, only last winter. They write of course—but that is different. Do tell me about them."

"Very well," agreed the girl, moving to sit down. "I'll tell you whatever you like, with pleasure. You must know, that my aunt, Mrs. Kyle, has a passion for travelling. We have been to Egypt, and the West Indies, to Madeira, and to India. I loved India, perhaps because I was born there—born in Bareilly—which was one reason why we stayed quite a long time in that delightful station."

"You didn't remember it, of course?"

"No, I left it when I was six months old. Both my father and mother died there."

"Ah, that was hard luck!"

"We tried to discover their bungalow, but never succeeded. Probably it had been pulled down. It was sure to have been rather miserable, because they were so very, very, poor."

"What was your father's regiment?"

"He was a captain in the Black Rangers, and was killed in trying to save a runaway."

"Yes. Now I think, I can remember his monument in the church."

India, Bareilly and his regiment, all proved a link between Conroy and his guest. He unearthed and produced, a mildewed, ant-eaten, but precious book, containing photographs of places with which they were

both familiar. These they pored over together, side by side (the brown head and the black head all but touching), pointing out and recalling various well-known objects, and recognizing acquaintances among some of the groups. Miss Kyle and her companion had been suddenly transformed into a pair of friendly comrades, imbued with happy memories of sun-steeped scenes—figuratively, the East had joined their hands!

As Conroy listened to tidings of the 50th Lancers, his eyes shone with animation, his heart was evidently stirred by the memories of his regiment. He plied Rhoda with questions respecting his own special chums, and exhibited the keenest interest in the prowess of the men at tent-pegging, the performances of the polo ponies; also the histories of various officials in the station—who were still there?—and who had left? Here, indeed, was a totally different individual; no longer the silent and embarrassed host, but a man who talked eagerly of India and his brother officers, and listened to all his companion could tell him, with wistful, and touching attention.

“How sorry you must have been to leave it!” she exclaimed. “Don’t you miss it horribly—the life, the sun, the constant action?”

Conroy made no reply; as he looked out of the window she could only see the outline of his temple and jaw,—and noted that the jaw twitched. Undoubtedly she had stumbled upon a sore subject, and took herself to task for her hateful stupidity, and want of tact.

After a moment's silence, her host faced her with complete self-possession, and began to question her with respect to her own affairs.

"And so you were sent home from Bareilly as an infant?"

"Yes, my father's people adopted me. I never knew anyone on my mother's side. I live with an aunt, who is very good to me."

"That one can see!" he responded with a smile—as his eyes travelled over her dress.

"Yes," she answered, with a deprecating gesture of a slim hand; "I know I look expensive! Aunt Char is so generous, and gives me heaps of presents, and an allowance."

"I wish some relative would do as much for Bryda."

"That's your sister?" she asked.

"Yes," handing down, as he spoke, the photograph of a pretty girl, "but she's twice as good-looking as this."

"I think she's perfectly lovely!" said Rhoda. "What a pull such a face does give a girl!"

"It doesn't do much for Bryda. She's hard at work all day long, between poultry and garden, and makes money out of both. She undertakes all the house-keeping, and is one of the most unselfish, and the very best—I'm sure you will like her."

"I'm sure I shall, and I hope she will like *me*. She has made me such a pretty pincushion, and lent me her own carpet."

Slowly replacing the photograph, and turning about, Conroy said :

" Then Bryda knew you were expected, and never said a word to me. I wonder why ? "

" I think I can tell you the reason," replied the girl with a disarming smile ; " because she was afraid ! And I must say, I think it was rather hard on me, to have to beard you (so to speak), unannounced and single-handed." Then, as he made no reply : " You say that Bryda does the housekeeping. What is my cousin Dorothea's line ? "

" Oh, ' Doatie,' as she is called, is the society one ; she loves tennis and dancing, and goes about with her mother—who is very popular. Bryda and I are the little pigs who stay at home. I farm, and break and sell horses. My sister sells eggs."

" But don't you ever go anywhere ? " inquired Rhoda.

" To church, yes, where I read the Lessons. Now and then to a race-meeting, and I get an odd day's salmon fishing, and woodcock shooting. I hunt hard all winter—but that of course is business—I ride to advertise. I have really no time for society. You see, I'm trying to keep this property from slipping out of the family altogether."

" Then you are very fond of it ? "

" I am. I suppose it is in my blood. Of course, only for Lismoyle I would never have left India ; but every man has his own drill to hoe, and Lismoyle happens to be mine."

"It's a beautiful old place," she remarked, "and so reposeful."

"You think so?" he said eagerly.

"Yes, I do."

Through the open window, and the dead silence, came the far-away whistle of a train, and she went on:

"What a lot I've crammed into one day—! This time last night I was in the Irish mail, tearing along towards Crewe."

"And may I ask the result of your twenty-four hours' bird's-eye view, and your first impressions of Ireland?"

"My twelve hours' impression of Ireland," corrected the girl. "It strikes me, that the Irish people are more attached to their country than most other nations. They have naturally good manners; they are emotional, easily roused to enthusiasm or fury" (she was thinking of Big Jane); "they are also reverent. I was surprised, when I was driving on the milk-float, to see the driver lift his cap as we passed a chapel."

"Oh, yes, the torch of faith, is kept alight over here; we are a religious people, and more or less a nation of mystics. Now for the other side of the shield."

"Well, I think the Irish are careless, casual, lazy—and have no regard whatever for time."

"You may well say that," he assented.

"But the queer mishaps and mistakes, that make Parker (that's my maid) so indignant, merely amuse me. I suppose it's my Irish blood."

" Yes. Such mishaps as arriving on a visit to find no welcome, but an empty house. I think you've let us down very cheaply. We're a scatter-brained lot."

" But you *have* the brains to scatter? "

Here the entry of Bessie with a note, caused a slight interruption—Bessie, who was delighted to see that, after all his raging, and "carrying-on," Niel and the young lady, were as thick as thieves—smoking together the same as two young men,—and no doubt talking racing.

After he had asked permission, read, and destroyed the note, Captain Conroy said :

" Do you ride, Miss Kyle? "

" Yes, and I like it most awfully. But I've only ridden in the Row, or on Egyptian donkeys and at Bareilly on the racecourse of a morning. I've never done any hunting—I live in London."

" I've a clinking little mare that would carry you nicely. I lent her to Dorothea, but she always gave her a sore back,—besides being all the time in a sky-blue funk."

" To the best of my belief, I've never given a sore back, and I'm not a bit nervous. I don't like to boast, but I really am not afraid of anything—so far. I brought over a habit, and if you will allow me to ride this animal, I know I shall enjoy it immensely."

" There's ten o'clock striking," he said, rising, " and I'm sure you must be longing to finish that sleep I disturbed. So if you will allow me, I'll light your candle, and wish you good-night."

Rhoda accepted this dismissal without demur ; she really was tired and sleepy. Her host escorted her to the foot of the stairs, ceremoniously handed her a massive silver candlestick, and watched her as she ascended with careless, swaying grace. Half-way up, she halted, and called back :

" Please take notice, Captain Conroy, that if I see a rat in my room——" and she paused expressively.

" Yes ? "

" I shall jump out of the window ! "

" But I understood that you were absolutely fearless ? "

" No—I forgot rats."

" Well," he answered, in the same light tone, " if the worst happens—and you've made no other arrangements—I promise you shall be buried in the family vault ! "

" Thank you," she replied, and ran upstairs laughing.

CHAPTER XI

MISS KYLE slept soundly on this, her first night in Ireland, and if the rats were rampant, the weary new-comer did not hear them. She awoke, to find Parker at her bedside, looking positively cheerful as she announced :

"Your bath is ready, miss, and it's just nine o'clock."

"So late? What time is breakfast?"

"Whenever you please. Captain Conroy had his at eight. They will send yours up here."

"All right. I'll be ready in three-quarters of an hour."

As she spoke, she sprang out of bed, and pattered over to the open window. The view was clear and beautiful: the park vividly green—a world of lustrous foliage—the mountains intensely blue, with marvellous changing shades, from a rich cobalt to a misty grey. The soft air felt delicious; it seemed to touch her hair tenderly, to caress her face, and the morning sent her an imperious summons to come forth. Between two trees she caught sight of a gay

and tempting hammock—and how she loved a hammock!—there was the peacock, balancing himself on the back of an iron garden-seat, and Pekoe and Freddy rolling each other over on the grass. She must hurry down and join them.

The breakfast-tray brought not only a tempting meal—new-laid eggs, hot cakes, fruit, and coffee—but also a note addressed in a fine, bold, but unknown handwriting: “To Miss Kyle, Lismoyle Castle.”

So it was a castle. How amazing! But why? (Merely because there were the ruins of an old fortress in the demesne—the original Lismoyle.) She opened the note and read:

“Rahan Court,

“Tuesday evening.

“DEAR MISS KYLE,

“I understand from Captain Conroy that you have arrived at Lismoyle, and find no one to entertain you but himself, and as he is obliged to be out all day, I am hoping that you will come to me until your aunt returns. She and I are very old friends, and I shall be delighted to have you. I will motor over to-morrow, Wednesday, at eleven o'clock, and send a cart for your luggage.

“Yours sincerely,

“LYDIA DONOVAN.”

“Thus I am got rid of!” thought Rhoda, “and how nicely she puts it. Not a hint of the supreme

awkwardness of my situation." Aloud to Parker: "I'm leaving here at eleven, and going to Rahan Court. Mrs. Donovan will call for us, so please have my things ready."

"Yes, miss, I have them finished. I heard early this morning we were moving. Last night Captain Conroy sent off a man on horseback with a note; and he got the answer after dinner. Of course, miss, you couldn't stop here alone with a single gentleman—and, anyway, it's a poor place, and not fit for a lady."

"You seem to forget, Parker, that my aunt lives here."

"Well, miss, by all accounts, she often forgets that herself," was Parker's pert reply.

Her mistress gave the maid a quick look, and said sharply:

"You need not take everything. We shall only be away for a few days. I am coming back."

"And I am not," murmured Parker under her breath; then aloud: "Your white linen, I suppose, miss; and the white French hat?"

As soon as she was dressed, Miss Kyle went down to the hall, and stood in the open doorway, where she was presently joined by Captain Conroy, and the family dogs.

"Good-morning," he said cheerfully. "I see I may take it for granted that you were *not* disturbed!"

"No, I slept like a top, and awoke disgracefully late. You are an early bird."

"Yes. I'm always out at seven and I've got

through a lot since breakfast—exercising horses, and leaving the men free to help with the harvest. Labour is so difficult to get at this time, and I often lend a hand myself.”

“Do you really?” she exclaimed. “Then you have no pride of class?”

“No, not that sort of cheap pride; but I’m afraid I have only too much of another pattern. Shall we take a turn in the garden? Mrs. Donovan isn’t due for twenty minutes. I suppose you got her note?”

“Yes. I am so sorry to be giving such trouble. It’s really too bad that your kind friend should have an utter stranger thrust upon her.”

This had been precisely his own case, and as the thought darted through Rhoda’s mind, her cheeks flamed.

“She only wants a colour to be a pretty girl,” was what her companion said to himself, as he considered her slim, svelt figure, wealth of brown hair, and delicate white skin. A well-cut coat, and picturesque hat, detracted nothing from the picture. Miss Kyle looked decidedly attractive, and undeniably expensive.

Rhoda, for her part, had not failed to notice her host’s appearance by broad daylight. He wore a rough light tweed suit, leather leggings, and a blue linen shirt, that seemed to take its shade, from his wonderful black-lashed eyes.

Accompanied by the three dogs, the couple traversed the laurel tunnel in dead silence,—each thinking of the other.

"Mrs. Donovan will be delighted," said Conroy, as he unlatched the gate, and they emerged from green gloom, to golden sunshine. "She is our nearest neighbour, and keeps open house in the good old Irish fashion. This is called the Ladies' Garden," indicating a grass plot, intersected with beds of roses, and encircled by a herbaceous border. "Bryda struggles with it, but she has little time. Her garden-ing is chiefly commercial: she sells the peaches as well as plants, and makes a pound a week out of her poultry. I don't know anyone who works so hard, for such small results. But every little helps; you see, I am not concealing our poverty from you, Miss Kyle, as I understand that we are more or less birds of a feather!"

Once more Rhoda blushed—the blush of guilt—filled with the shamed conviction that she was acting a lie.

"Oh, how I adore these roses!" she exclaimed, suddenly burying her face in a large cluster, whose colour matched her face.

"So do I. Lygon and I, when we chummed together, had first-class roses at Bareilly, lots of La France. We were awfully proud of our show, and often invited ladies to tea to make them envious."

As he spoke, he drew out a pocket-knife, cut off several blooms, and handing them to Rhoda, he added:

"Though taking roses to Rahan is like coals to Newcastle. There, you will see gardens, and gardens!"

While he was speaking, the door into the yard had

opened, and Big Jane filled the aperture. In a second, her quick, bold eye had taken in the picture—the Captain and the strange girl—him talking away quite eager, and giving her a bunch of Miss Bryda's best flowers! Big Jane withdrew, stealthily and unnoticed—there would be no peaches just *yet*!

"We had a pet fox till last week," announced Conroy, as in walking round the garden they passed an empty kennel. "I got him as a cub the first November I came home, and Bryda reared him. He was wonderfully tame—but, of course, a fowl-fancier.

"Naturally," assented his companion.

"So we kept him in prison in his house, but he always had a free week-end. We let him out in the garden from Saturday till Monday, and turned in Freddy for a few hours as company. You see, they were brought up together as children."

"How awfully funny—a Saturday-to-Monday fox! Where is he?"

"In some earth by now—possibly he may give us a rattling good run this winter. Last week he escaped,—I suspect with the connivance of Freddy, who, you may remark, follows us round with a sneaking, conscious air, and I shouldn't wonder if Kerry was in the secret too. He is a queer fellow; every morning at seven, winter and summer, he goes down to the river and has his bath."

"Quite a gentleman in his habits!"

"Yes, Kerry is a gentleman, but I'm not so sure

of Freddy. I'm afraid, that he is not only an accessory to breaking prison, but a receiver of stolen goods. I've seen Pekoe—who fags for him—bringing him nice fresh eggs—a tight fit too, in his little black mouth." He paused as a motor-horn sounded. "That's Mrs. Donovan—we must get back."

They were just in time to see a smart grey car glide up to the hall door. It was driven by a broadly-built woman, with her head muffled in white gauze.

"Hullo, Niel!" she called out in a cheery, throaty voice. "I'm to the minute, you see. Such punctuality should shake this old house to its foundations, eh?" As she spoke she offered him an eager hand.

"So this is the young lady," she continued, unfastening her veil, and disclosing the firmly-cut face of a woman of five-and-forty. She had dark hair, black eyes, a high colour, and Rhoda instantly recognized her as the original of the photograph on the smoking-room chimney-piece.

"It's really too good of you to have me, and such a shame to put you to all this trouble," protested the girl in her clear English treble. "My unexpected arrival has thrown everything out of gear."

Mrs. Donovan, with narrowed eyes, measured this elegant, well-bred stranger; noted her air of cool self-possession, and gave her an odd, deliberate stare. No, she was not a scrap good-looking; and for all her manner and her smart costume, was just a cock-nosed, pasty-faced Londoner, who would be at a terrible disadvantage among the marvellous

complexions of the South. Embracing this comforting reflection, Mrs. Donovan took a fancy to Miss Kyle on the spot.

"Oh, it's not a bit of trouble," she answered; "we are delighted to come across the unexpected in these parts. Niel, give me a hand out—I'm bothered with this new coat."

As she descended heavily, and stood on the gravel beside her, Rhoda realized that she was a big woman, with a clumsy, high-shouldered figure, rigorously repressed in a pair of armour-like corsets.

"Now that I come to look at you again, Miss Kyle," addressing herself to Rhoda, "I believe I know you by sight!"

"Really?"

"Yes. I do a little bit of the London season, and I'm sure I've seen you about at theatres and races with Lady Dolly Darcy. She's so striking looking, one can't help noticing *her*."

"Yes, very likely; we are tremendous friends. She wanted me to go to her in Scotland now."

"But you thought you would give old Ireland a turn. Lady Dolly is lovely—such a bright, attractive, face, and how she dresses! That tall colonel in the Lancers is always her shadow!"

"Oh, she has dozens of those sort of shadows," said her friend, with a pretty shrug. "And they are just as harmless."

"I see!—safety in a multitude, eh?" Then turning to Conroy: "When do you expect Madame?"

"Oh, any time. I've wired and written."

"She'll be in a fine way when she finds that Miss Kyle has arrived," said Mrs. Donovan, seating herself on the steps. "Miss Kyle, your aunt is hopeless! She can never remember a date or an appointment. I declare to goodness, Niel, she's getting worse."

"Impossible!" was the emphatic response.

At this Mrs. Donovan gave a loud laugh, like a double knock. "I tell you what, if I were you, Niel, I'd wring that peacock's neck, and make chicken broth of him and his wife. They are well known to bring bad luck."

"But he belongs to Madame," objected Conroy.

"Yes, I remember. She got the pair at the Agricultural Show, and brought them home in the tub car—and a fine job it was! She had an idea that the green and blue plumage sets off her tawny hair when she'd be sitting out, as we are doing now. Poor Kathleen, it's a shame to give her away! When do you expect Bryda?"

"She talked of coming home on Friday, but I told her to take another week."

"She won't. She's just pining this moment for Freddy, and the Orpingtons, and her brother. Did you have a good fair?"

"Middling. I sold the brown, and the grey; but Lamplight knocked himself badly in the horse-box, and I have him here."

"Oh, he'll be all right for the Horse Show, and you'll sell him well. He's worth two hundred, every

penny of it. I'd buy him this minute, only I'm a stone over his weight. Well now," rising to her feet, "I know you're busy, Niel, and we must get a move on. Miss Kyle, is this your maid? She and Connor can sit behind, you and I in front. There's no fear. I'm a first-rate driver—clean certificate!" she added, with a loud laugh, as she settled herself in the car, and took hold of the wheel. "Good-bye, Niel," she called to him, "mind you look us up soon," and they moved smoothly away.

Mrs. Donovan could both steer and talk; and, indeed, they met no one on the lonely country road, but Coneen, who was bringing parcels to the Castle.

Her new acquaintance questioned Rhoda about her journey, and screamed with delight over her mode of transit from Doonbeg.

"It will be a story for years!" she declared. She was particularly inquisitive with respect to the first meeting between her guest, and Niel Conroy. "How did he look?" she questioned. "Do tell me!"

"He looked horrified, shocked, dumbfounded, stunned," replied Rhoda.

"And what did he say?"

"He told me he had advised my aunt not to invite me."

"Well, I declare! And, of course, she took no notice?"

"Apparently not."

"He must have given you a turn. I've known him black—but never rude."

"He wasn't exactly rude," corrected the girl, "only outspoken. He explained, that I'd miss so much I had been used to, and be uncomfortable."

"Well, I wouldn't be surprised if he was right."

"I'm afraid he thinks I'm a sort of flimsy, fastidious English girl, but I really enjoy the country, and won't mind doing without luxuries."

"You never can tell what you can do without, until it's taken from you," said Mrs. Donovan sagely. "Now this is my little shanty," she announced as, grinning at her own joke, she drove between the great lodges, and up a long, smooth avenue.

Rahan Court was an imposing pile. The house, which faced full south, had a heavy background of tall elms, and beautiful pleasure-grounds sweeping down to a sunk fence, which separated them from the park. The beds were aglow with begonias, geraniums and gladiolas: there were pergolas, and screens of rustic work, veiled in ramblers. A few palms and bamboos struck an exotic note, and the whole gay expanse, made a brilliant border, for a wide-spreading demesne, and clumps of magnificent timber.

"It's a nice old place, isn't it?" said Mrs. Donovan complacently, as she drew up at the foot of the steps. "It was just a tumble-down barrack when my husband bought it twenty years ago. This was his part of the world, and he felt drawn back to it. He and his father made their money in Melbourne.—I'm from Queensland myself. Well, now, come in, come in?"

By this time the door stood wide, and two smart men-servants descended to assist their mistress, and to receive her wraps.

Miss Kyle, as she entered the Court, found herself once more inhaling the air of luxury and wealth. There was a grand entrance hall with yellow marble pillars—an attractive vista of cool, dim sitting-rooms, and a delicious perfume of freshly-cut flowers.

“I’ll just escort you upstairs first, and show you your quarters,” said Mrs. Donovan, “afterwards we can stroll in the gardens till lunch-time.”

The room allotted to Rhoda looked charming, with its soft pink carpet, white furniture, rose-bordered wallpaper, and chintz to correspond. Here, indeed, was a contrast to her shabby chamber at Lismoyle.

The late Michael Donovan had been a wealthy man, who made a large fortune in mutton, and mining, and had taken for his second wife, the handsome, dowerless—and practical Lydia Kelly. Rahan Court was never the home of his ancestors—that was a little four-roomed farmhouse on the property—but the family abode, of the ancient race of Thomond,—now extinct.

Rhoda went to the dressing-table and straightened her hat, then betook herself to a window overlooking the park. There away to the left was Lismoyle; she could distinguish its heavy woods. What a number and variety of experiences had been crowded into a short time. Her journey to Lismoyle with its original servants, and animals; the good-looking Indian

officer, who worked so laboriously. Here was her second host within twenty-four hours, the practical, wealthy, emphatic widow. Of her aunt and betrayer, so far no sign. Her letters and promises had been as mere froth on the sea, misleading will-of-the-wisps, false signals. Rhoda's thoughts turned once more to Niel Conroy, as she had last caught sight of him, standing on the steps cap in hand. Bessie was right. Whatever else he might be; disappointed, isolated, poverty-stricken, he was never a man to be overlooked, or forgotten. With this conviction firmly implanted in her mind, Miss Kyle turned to the writing-table.—Irish posts were so madly erratic, that she must not run the risk of losing a day.

As she sat with a sheet of superfine paper before her, "Rahan Court, Doonbeg," emblazoned upon it in scarlet and gold—she felt at a loss how to explain her second address within two days—without compromising her relative! However, she must make the best of it. She began to fear that she was becoming alarmingly clever in writing, and saying things, that were not quite—*quite*—— For instance, yesterday, she had wired to London:

"Lismoyle, arrived, all well," when all was not well! She had also done her utmost to lead Captain Conroy to suppose, that she was a poor relation, depending upon Aunt Char; but then, it was so much more exciting and interesting to pose as a pauper, and to be valued for one's self alone; and she had a firm conviction that were he to guess that Lismoyle

was harbouring the heiress of the Kyles, he would not merely urge his step-mother to throw cold water on her visit, but would do his utmost to thrust her (politely) out of the house! On second thoughts (and she nibbled the end of her penholder), would he? Well, just now she was composing another deceit, and she quoted to herself:

"Oh what a tangled web we weave,
When first we practise to deceive."

All the same, she dipped her pen into the ink, and wrote:

"DEAREST AUNT CHAR,

"You will be amazed to see from this magnificent address, that I am no longer at Lismoyle, but at Rahan Court, the guest of a rich widow, Mrs. Donovan, an old friend of Aunt Kathleen's—who is away from home for a couple of days; and, meanwhile, I have been taken in, in the celebrated Irish fashion. I am enjoying myself enormously." (To herself, "Yes, I am!") "The country is lovely, and already I have developed a huge, and unladylike appetite, and sleep like a top. The post goes off at such odd moments, that I write in desperate haste, hoping that I may catch it. I think of you all arriving just now at Aix, and meeting, this evening, crowds of our old, old friends—the Mostyns, the Capels, the Murrays—greet them all *de ma part*! I will write you a very long letter next time—perhaps to-morrow. Salaams to the Marshalls.

"Ever your loving,

"RHODA.

" P.S.—Parker is frightfully cross and discontented. She loathes this country, and I suspect will abandon me, and leave me to my fate ; but even so, I shall survive."

When Mrs. Kyle received this epistle at Aix, it puzzled her completely. She showed it to her friend, Mrs. Marshall, and invited her opinion.

" Funny, very ! I think the girl has had some sort of surprise, but not of an unpleasant nature. It's certainly a little mysterious—two addresses within twenty-four hours. *I hope* it's all right ? "

" Oh, yes," replied her aunt, " for in spite of her gay ways, Rhoda has lots of sense. I fancy this Madame Conroy is a feckless, silly sort of creature. Well, we shall hear all about it in the next letter."

Just as Rhoda had stamped her note, there was a heavy thump upon the bedroom door, and Mrs. Donovan—wearing a coquettish garden hat—appeared and said :

" Oh, you're writing, are you ? We have two posts a day. I was wondering what was keeping you ? Now come along with me, and I'll take you round the gardens."

CHAPTER XII

THE gardens at Rahan Court were famous ; their mistress's pride in them, was thoroughly justified. Taste, money and a gracious soil, had done their utmost to bring them to perfection. Mrs. Donovan was a remarkably strong, energetic woman, hardy and weatherproof, who superintended much of the work herself, and was also active in managing her money matters, her household, her stable, and her friends.

As she and her guest strolled along the velvet-like sward, she proffered her a suggestion :

" If I were you, I should take my hat off. A bit of tan would improve you, and give you *some* sort of colour. You won't mind my saying it, dear, but your complexion is like a bit of putty ! This fine air is a grand thing, isn't it ? So different from the grit of London."

Miss Kyle, a little stung by this reflection on her appearance, said to herself that this bouncing widow was a woman entirely without manners or refinement. Aloud, she merely remarked :

"Some people find London air so stimulating."

"What rubbish!" exclaimed Mrs. Donovan, as with a toss of her head she preceded her companion along a narrow path. "Smuts, and fog, and smoke."

Divested of her motor-coat, her form was square-shouldered, flat-backed, and solid. Admirers declared that Lydia Donovan was a splendid figure of a woman, and carried herself like a queen. However that might be, her hunters carried fifteen stone,—including saddle,—and for these hunters, she paid a reckless price.

With a brisk but majestic air, she led the way from the rock-garden to the water-gardens, the rosery and the wilderness, pointing out their various beauties with great animation. She discoursed volubly of her plants, their prices, and successes at various shows, and dealt with no light hand on the malice, and meanness, of rival exhibitors.

"Now there's Miss Murphy," and she paused to declaim, "with a garden the size of a tablecloth. She got first prize for carnations, and I know for a fact, that she coaxed the slips out of my second gardener—a nasty little sleveen of a fellow. She laid herself out to grow them, watching them day and night.—I'm surprised she didn't plant herself in the bed with them! I got the Cup for roses, and first prize for sweet-peas; but Mrs. Blake, the rector's wife, took first for begonias. I've thrown out stacks, that were better, when *I* grew them for show. Our gardens are our chief occupation and topic in the summer, and I must say Bryda Conroy is wonderful, with only one

old man to help her. She has got what they call 'the lucky hand,' and everything she puts in, flourishes."

Having exhausted the topic of her garden, the history of her flowers, her neighbours' gardens and their flowers, Mrs. Donovan led the way to a cool, thatched summer-house, where there were comfortable cushioned chairs, into one of which she sank with a loud, simultaneous creaking.

Lydia Donovan was a clever, rough, half-educated woman, with few mental resources, and no accomplishments: one who never took a needle in her hand, and rarely a book. She was all for outdoor occupation and action; a capital manager, a first-rate horse-woman and golfer, with a good head for business; her favourite relaxation was bridge, or what she called "a good chat." By no means ill-natured or malicious, she liked to be well posted in local news, and to come down to the actual bedrock of her neighbours' affairs,—and even the affairs of their distant kindred! It was whispered, that she was not too nice in her means of collecting information, nor above a gossip with a washerwoman, or a groom!

As she planted herself beside Rhoda, it was with the enterprising intention of extracting from her the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, with regard to her personal history. Mrs. Donovan's methods were crude, but effective; when she desired special intelligence, she thrust aside all squeamish delicacy, and just asked plain, blunt, searching ques-

tions. Her methods were successful, and in a very short time, she had ruthlessly extracted every detail, that she wished to know.

"And so your mother and Madame were sisters?" she began without preamble, "Kathleen and Rosaleen Lynch. I've heard Madame say they were the only two in family, and were celebrated as 'the lovely Lynches.'"

"I know very little about my mother's people."

"Oh, then your aunt will tell you more than plenty. She's *great* on family! She says your father and mother made a sort of runaway match, and that he and his wife lived and died in poverty out in India. Is that true?"

"Yes, I'm sorry to say it is," was their daughter's meek rejoinder.

"Well, there's no look of poverty about *you*!" continued the questioner, with her eyes riveted upon Rhoda's pearls.

"No, I live with an aunt who is well off, and very generous to me."

"She must be, when she pays a maid for you, and dresses you in such style. Mind you keep in her good graces!"

Rhoda made no reply. Mrs. Donovan had jumped at the conclusion that she was a dependent—Mrs. Donovan would undoubtedly spread the information far and wide—so much the better!

"Madame seems to know as little about you as you about her?" she resumed.

"Yes, there was never any correspondence between my mother's people, and the Kyles," replied Rhoda.

"And who broke the ice?"

"I did. Aunt Kathleen is my nearest relative, and I simply longed to know her. I met some Dublin people who gave me her address."

"And you'd no idea what Madame was like. For that matter, you've no idea *now*," and Mrs. Donovan burst into a loud hilarious laugh.

"No. But I'm told she's wonderfully pretty, and young-looking."

"Yes. She and Doatie are often mistaken for sisters; and when that happens, Doatie is fit to be tied! Whereabouts in London does your aunt live?"

"At 400, Grosvenor Street."

"Grosvenor Street!" (visibly impressed by the address). "So then she must be rich! I suppose you go about a good deal, and are in what is called 'smart society.' Have you been presented?"

"Oh, yes. Six years ago."

"Six years ago? And how old are you?"

"I was twenty-four last June."

"Ah! Well, I don't think you look so much. Of course, that's because you're so thin. I wish I could get off a few stone. I've tried nearly everything,—but it's all no good."

"They say you shouldn't drink with your meals," suggested Rhoda.

"Oh, I never could stand that. Fancy drinking at

odd hours, like a horse or a dog! Well, now tell me about London—and London drawing-rooms. I have never been to one. What do you do when you first go in? Are the women nervous? And what sort of things, do you have for supper?"

For the next half-hour, the new arrival indulged a greedy ear with a description of courts, balls, the Opera, and plays; discoursed of Newmarket and Cowes, and related with considerable point, a few well-known stories—chestnuts, but to her companion neither more nor less, than rare and refreshing fruit. Possibly these tales diverted the lady's attention from dangerous topics, and further probing inquiries. However, she now knew where Mrs. Kyle lived, her age, the number of her servants, the address of her *modiste*, and had even dragged from Rhoda, the names of her smart society friends! In return for all this information, it was rather ungrateful of Mrs. Donovan to say:

"With such wonderful advantages, and set off by good clothes, I must say, I'm astonished that you're not married, Miss Kyle. But in these days, all the men are so mercenary."

"Oh, surely not all men?" protested the girl.

"No, no, I will not go as far as that. For instance, there is Niel Conroy; he is just the opposite. A rich wife would be the making of him; but he would rather fight out his life on twopence a day than be beholden to anyone. Then of course, Niel is a fool," and she gave a little impatient stamp. "His father was one sort of idiot—and he's another!"

In the evening, after dinner, Mrs. Donovan and her guest, sat in a charming apartment, known as "the little drawing-room," sipping coffee, and smoking cigarettes. The hostess, attired in a loose yellow teagown, reposed among cushions in an attitude of expansive ease. By lamplight, Rhoda decided, that she was distinctly handsome: expressive black eyes, a well-shaped nose, fine teeth, and a high colour were, so to speak, her assets. Her style was showy, but effective.—The weak points were, large feet and hands, a heavy jaw, and a rather sensual mouth,—which, nevertheless, expressed good humour, and generosity.

"May I prowl round, and look at all your pretty things?" said Rhoda.

"You may, to be sure! but I'd much rather that you would sit down beside me, and talk. I hate silence. I have enough of that, when I'm alone of an evening."

"But Captain Conroy told me you were always entertaining, and generally have a house full of guests."

"Tell me,"—Mrs. Donovan's face lit up, and she sat suddenly erect,—"*has he talked to you about me? What has he said?*"

"Only that you were very kind, and hospitable, and an old friend."

"Oh," her flare of excitement fading. "He is right. I do have a good many people off and on, but that's not what I want. What I really do crave

for, is a companion. I've a niece out in Sydney, dying and whining, to come to me. It's something like your own case—the rich aunt, and the poor niece."

Rhoda felt the colour of guilt once more rising to her hair, and turned away to examine a sketch.

"And are you not going to invite her?" she inquired, after a long pause.

"Well, no. It's like this," and she held out her cigarette, and looked at it thoughtfully; "you see, it might be a case of two's company, three's trumpery."

"You mean——"

"That I might marry—yes," and she gave a complacent laugh.

"Oh, yes, of course. Why not? You must feel rather lonely in this big house. Isn't this a sketch of Lismoyle?"

"It is. Give it here to me?" extending her hand.

"Bryda did it. It's rather good, eh?"

"Excellent," assented Rhoda, as she leaned over her chair.

"It's a melancholy business. The whole weight of that tumble-down place, on the shoulders of one unfortunate young man."

Rhoda received the tendered sketch, and sat down, and glanced interrogatively at her companion.

"Yes, it's a heart-breaking struggle, paying off the interest on mortgages, and trying to keep the house going, and out of debt. Your aunt is my friend, and the very best of company, but 'Madame Butterfly,'

as they call her, is the most reckless, extravagant woman, in the South of Ireland, and a heavy stone round the neck of poor Niel. It's my opinion that if he doesn't mind himself—she will drown him *yet*. He saves and screws, and drinks water, and goes shabby, while she scatters with both hands."

"Certainly, that is rather dreadful! But of course the property belongs to Aunt Kathleen."

"*Belongs!*" echoed Mrs. Donovan, and her voice grew suddenly loud. "Not at all! Every blade and stone belongs to Niel; she has her fine jointure,—and hard set he is to pay it,—but she has no more claim to live at Lismoyle, than you have! Niel could put her and her girl into the road if he liked, but he's not one of that sort.—*All* the washing done at home."

Rhoda received this information in dead silence. The intelligence was in the nature of such an overwhelming shock, that it left her speechless—every vestige of colour, had faded from cheek, and lips. She felt conscious of a sort of mental dislocation! So her aunt had invited her to a house that was not hers; to become yet another burden on Niel Conroy! Something in her silence, and her ghastly pallor moved Mrs. Donovan to turn, and inquire:

"What on earth is the matter?"

"Something awful is the matter," replied Rhoda, in a faint voice, rising as she spoke.

Her hostess surveyed her with a pair of startled wide-open eyes. Why was she looking so white, and agitated?

"From what you tell me, I find I have been brought over to Ireland under false pretences."

"What is the girl saying?"

"Yes," steadying herself by the back of a chair; in a few rapid sentences Rhoda related the history of her visit.

"I always wanted to know my Aunt Kathleen. I told you I got her address from some people who met her in Dublin, and I wrote, and said I would so like to correspond with her."

Here she was taken with a violent trembling, and was obliged to sit down.

"Don't talk—wait," urged Mrs. Donovan. "I'll fetch you some brandy."

"No, no, I'm all right, and I *must* get this over. Everyone was against my coming to Ireland, except the doctor; and I'm naturally contrary and obstinate, and had my own way. It was settled that I was to come for six months, and pay five guineas a week as a P. G. Now my obstinacy and wilfulness have been most cruelly punished! There was no one to meet me; I was not expected; I came to an empty house; and last, but worst straw of all—to a house in which my aunt is a guest herself. Oh, I really think I shall die of shame!"

"You'll do nothing of the sort," declared Mrs. Donovan, with blunt confidence. "Why should *you* be ashamed? Here, take this fan, and just listen to me."

In a few crude sentences, this downright woman

sketched an outline of the state of affairs at Lismoyle. She spoke of the older Conroy's second marriage, his mental breakdown, and how for years, he had been robbed by Sullivan—a clever, ruthless fox! All the world had looked on, but dared not interfere; and there was Madame Butterfly, who never came near the place, living in Dublin, and spending money like a millionaire.

“I'll not say, Kitsey meant to destroy the family,” conceded her accuser, “but it was her neglect, and absence, and folly, that gave Sullivan the power to do his worst. After his father's death, when Niel came home, he found the house terribly dilapidated, the gardens and grounds a jungle. There were debts and mortgages beyond belief, and though Niel himself had lived on his pay, all the money to his credit at the Munster Bank, was exactly thirty shillings!”

“And it is *my* aunt who is accountable for all this,” and Rhoda suddenly burst into tears.

“Come, come—don't take on!” said Mrs. Donovan, rising and laying a powerful hand on Rhoda's shrinking shoulder. “If Sullivan had had me to deal with—I'd have made him toe the line. Tell me, my dear, what on earth put it into your foolish head, that Lismoyle belonged to a woman?”

“Partly, I suppose, because the aunt I live with, is mistress of everything—house and furniture, motors and money—and I thought Aunt Kathleen, would be the same.”

“No, no, that's not the way with property over

here. Lismoyle is strictly entailed on the male heir, although it *is* mortgaged to the chimneys. I know that Kathleen Conroy has an airy-fairy way of writing and slurring over things, but I can't for the life of me understand, how she led you to suppose that Lismoyle belonged to *her* ! ”

“ Aunt Kathleen didn't say so in so many words, but of course when she sent me such warm invitations, I naturally believed——” Here she paused, struggling against another outburst of tears.

“ Oh, as for Kathleen's invitations, all the world knows what they mean ! She scatters them with both hands. Why, I've heard her invite people *here* ; but I soon put a stop to that ! It's different with Niel—he can't control her. He has had a frightfully hard time since he came home, and has been trying to patch up things ever since.”

“ But how can he ? ” asked Rhoda, with streaming eyes ; “ what can he do ? ”

“ Well, of course,” said Mrs. Donovan, who was sweeping about the room, with her long yellow gown trailing behind her, “ of course, there is one way out. Niel's only chance is to marry a rich wife. If he doesn't see that himself—others see it for him ! ” and she halted before a long mirror, and critically surveyed her own reflection.

“ Do you know that in my aunt's letters she never once mentioned Captain Conroy,” murmured Rhoda in a stifled voice. “ I was nearly as much surprised to see him, as he was to see me. It has been a

terrible mistake from first to last. I shall return to London the day after to-morrow, and join Aunt Char at Aix."

"Now don't do anything in a hurry," adjured her hostess—raising two hands glittering with diamonds. "You've not seen your aunt yet; she has extraordinary personal magnetism, as I believe they call it now—'fascination' was the name, when I was a girl. When she takes the notion, she can talk you out of your shoes, and persuade anyone that black is white. Then there's Bryda—Bryda is just a darling, and a rock of sense. I understand she has a young man out in India,—though she keeps him very quiet; for of course, there's no money. And talking of money—if you're going to pay five guineas a week, that will be a wonderful help—why, it will keep the house! Then you say the doctor has ordered you good country air, and rest, and you will never better this part of the world. I know, that it has all been terribly awkward for you, and you have taken it splendidly. Be advised by *me*—don't do anything till you've seen Kathleen. Niel and his sister will be glad of your company, and your money; and I may be wrong, but I have a notion that you are not the sort of girl that would like to go back, and say to a jeering crowd, 'You were right—and I was an obstinate fool.'"

She paused in her walk and looked keenly at Rhoda, as she added: "Besides, to return so promptly, would be an affront to Ireland. Sooner than let you

do that, I would lock you up, and keep you myself."

"Oh, thank you, Mrs. Donovan, but I really ought to go—I must go. The situation is—is—unbearable."

"Now just listen to me," extending a declamatory hand. "I'm aware I'm inclined to be too free with my tongue, and that my talk is sometimes exaggerated. Kathleen is very affectionate. She adored your mother, and she really wants you. I believe you might influence her, and get her out of her odd harum-scarum ways. Why not try Lismoyle—anyway, for a couple of months? Our air is splendid—as you will see by Bryda's complexion; and it's not as if you weren't going to *pay*!"

"Oh, please say nothing of that to anyone—it's a dead secret."

"All right. I know I put everything very bluntly, and probably I should have held my tongue. Do try and stay on, and give Lismoyle a trial. I'll make it pleasant for you. I'll motor you about, and have bridge and little dinners."

Bridge and little dinners! the very things that Rhoda had escaped from!


"Come now," continued Mrs. Donovan, halting before her, and holding out her hands, "say you will stay—even for a month. If you run away, it will be all my fault, and I shall never forgive myself. I ought to have let you find out things for yourself, by *degrees*."

After a momentary hesitation, and with a smothered

sob, Rhoda put her delicate fingers into the large, expectant hand, which wrung them painfully.

"Then that's settled," said Mrs. Donovan, and she began to bustle round the room, and blow out candles. "Now, after our sensational evening, I think we had better go to bed."

Rhoda retired to her room, but not to bed. Her mind was in a whirl. How her head ached and throbbed! She was sorry that she had pledged herself to remain on, and yet she felt bound to do something, to repay the Conroys for the devastation her own aunt had wrought in their lives. What could she do? Nothing of importance—before next June; the five guineas a week might be some little help, and it would be cowardly to run away—now that she was acquainted with the real state of affairs.



and think of the
houses, how many
long ago
our people
and think of the
houses, how many
long ago
our people

MacEvann's man, a farmer has it now—he has
the house!

her eyes travelled over the great dilapidated mansion,
and its crumbling boundaries.

“People in Ireland have little money now. What
used to be the landed gentry, are now gentry without
land. They can't afford to occupy great barracks
that soak up a lot of servants, and so the big places
fall to pieces. I believe Niel Conroy is always

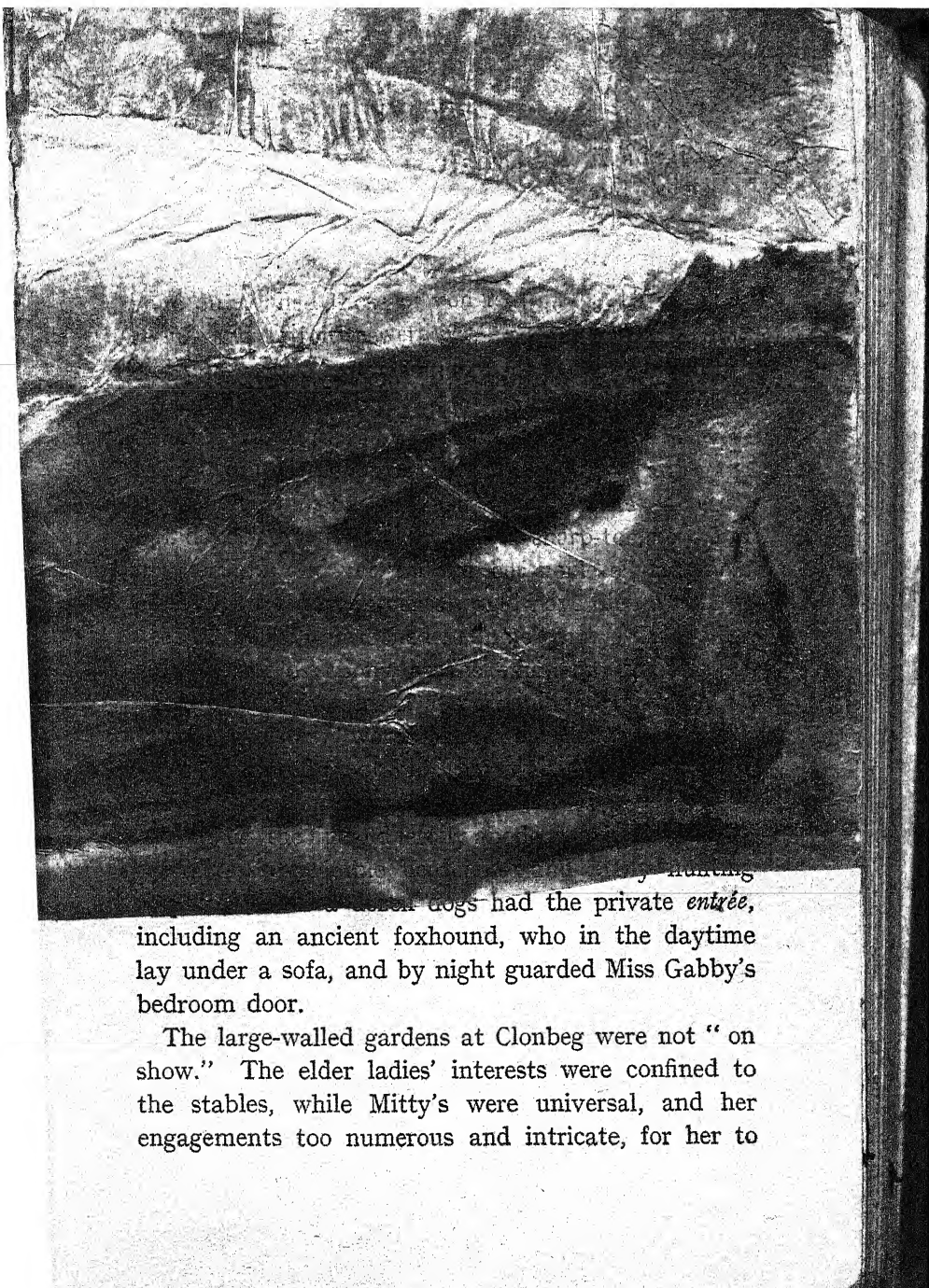
DISCOVERY

that this will be the end of

During their drive, Mrs. Donovan left cards on various acquaintances, among others at a grim old Georgian house, where a bearded man-servant informed Mrs. Donovan that "the ladies were" she disentangled herself from veils and rugs, muttered to her companion:

"These are the three Miss Moores—wizened old maids. Mitty, the youngest, runs the county; Lizzie and Gabby hunt. They are wonderful riders, though quite elderly; they loathe the summer, and spend the time in walking hounds, and knitting winter comforters, and counting the days till the cubbing begins."

In a few minutes Mrs. Donovan was presenting to her wondering friends a distinguished-looking, fashionably-dressed girl, by name Miss Kyle. The three sisters were small, wiry, weather-beaten women, of a certain age—that is to say, certainly over fifty. Miss Moore's brown wig had experienced many vicissitudes by flood and field; Gabriel (or Gabby), the second, was acclaimed the greatest talker and the finest horse-woman in the province; Mitty, the youngest, had no sporting proclivities, instead of enjoying a run with the local pack, she ran the neighbourhood, managed the clothing club, the coal fund, the croquet club, the bridge club, and the book club, and was always ready to accept a prominent part in any undertaking—from a rummage sale, to private theatricals. Her



...had the private *entrée*, including an ancient foxhound, who in the daytime lay under a sofa, and by night guarded Miss Gabby's bedroom door.

The large-walled gardens at Clonbeg were not "on show." The elder ladies' interests were confined to the stables, while Mitty's were universal, and her engagements too numerous and intricate, for her to

spare time to compete in
cultural triumphs.

"Yes, I am," she replied, inquired
taking a seat beside the stranger, and, with an eye that
was both inquisitive and calculating,—studying the
style of her dress, and considering to what use she
could put the young lady?

"Yes, I only arrived yesterday."

"I wonder how you will like the country?" she
chirped.

"Very much, I think," replied the visitor.

"It's greatly changed of late, especially around here.
Lismoyle used to be the centre of everything, when
the first Madame was alive. You are staying there?"

"No," replied Rhoda, blushing to the roots of her
hair. "My aunt made a mistake about the date of
my arrival, and I am with Mrs. Donovan."

Miss Mitty nodded her head knowingly, and laughed.
"Your aunt is a most extraordinarily forgetful
creature! I was obliged to turn her out of the book
club, because she either kept all the books, or lost
them! But she has the kindest heart. I've heard
of her sitting up all night with a sick turkey, and
bottle-feeding a little orphan pig in her own bedroom.
Miss Kyle, you look horrified!"

"No, I really am not. Not in the least," she
reiterated. "I'm fond of animals—though I have no
experience of turkeys, or pigs."

"Ah, well, you'll soon get used to Madame. Have
you met Captain Conroy?"

subject of Captain Conroy, silence

"It is wonderful about horses. My father bought a couple of hunters from him last year, and they have turned out splendidly. It's always a very ticklish thing, buying horses from people that you know. For my part, I think these sort of deals are at the bottom of the most bitter quarrels; but, really, Niel would sooner be out of pocket himself, than let another down. We have known him since he was a boy, and he is a great favourite with us. I suppose you will be staying over here for some time?"

"Yes—I am not sure—perhaps for several months."

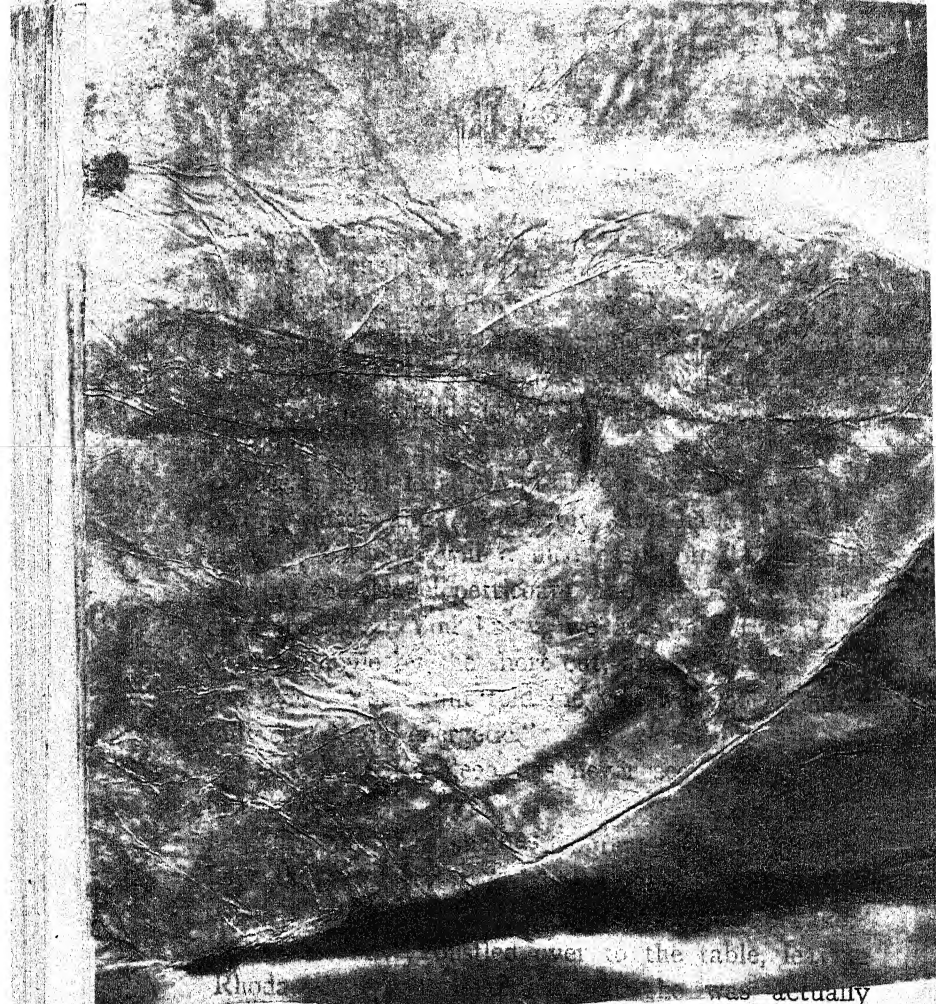
"Months! Then in that case, I must enlist you. Can you knit and sew, and cut out?" inquired Mitty, looking into her face, with a peering, and interested gaze.

"I can knit, but I'm not very clever with my needle."

"Oh, if you can knit socks, and make flannel garments, you will do! I'm determined to get something out of Lismoyle.—Madame is useless. Doatie's stitches are a mile long, and she fumbles all the time. Bryda comes when she can, but I know she is busy, so I don't press her. Now I want help for my sewing club, and you are bound to fill the Lismoyle gap."

"Must I?"

"Certainly you must," was Mitty's decisive answer. "You will have lots of spare time, and it's in a good cause. Do you intend to hunt?"



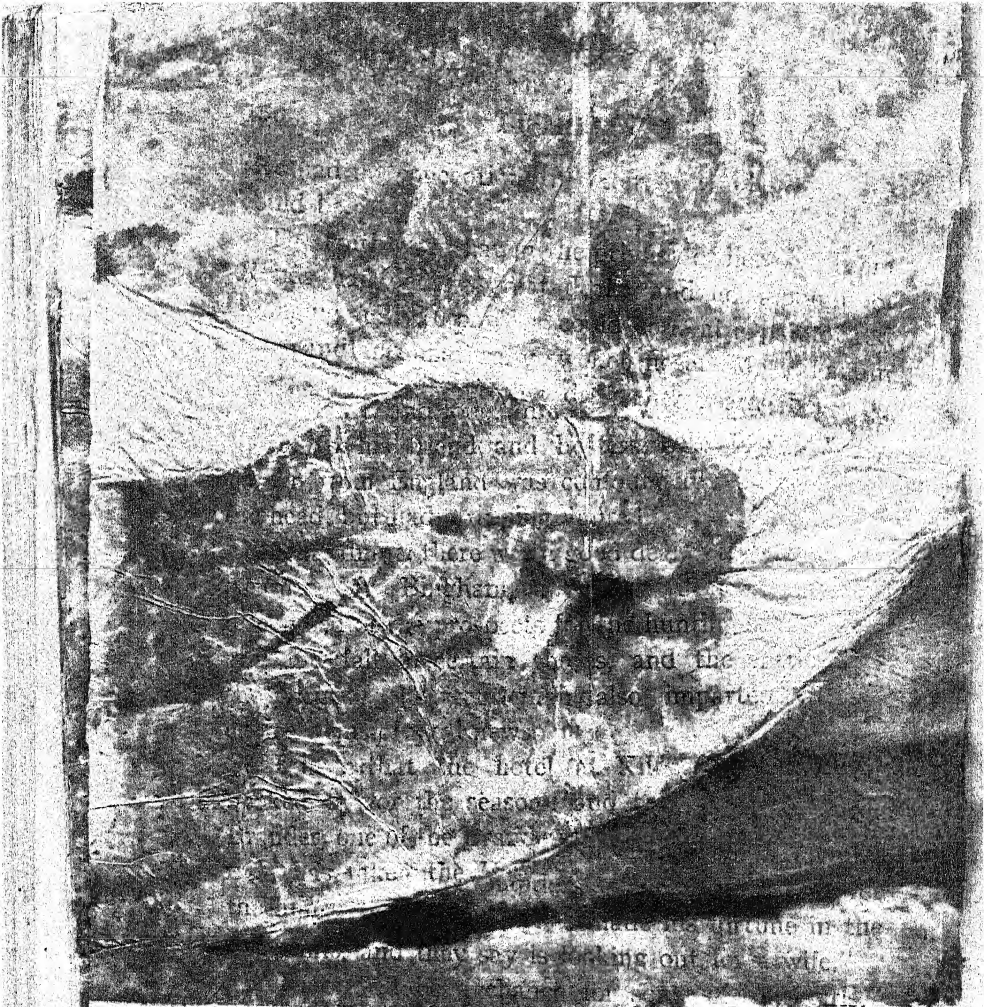
Rhoda had pulled over to the table, for she was actually engaged to work, and to keep accounts, by this domineering little old maid. Apparently she had accepted the task, by her somewhat stunned silence. After all, why not make winter clothes for the poor? as far as she could judge, she would have ample spare time.

Mrs. Donovan and the two elder Miss Moores, were engrossed in sporting talk, and scandal. Such sentences came to Rhoda as : "Got the vet. to pass him, and he had bog spavins ! Think of that !" "Hope that mannerless thruster, Major Spinner, won't be out this season." "Lots of fever." "They've been having a loose box to be had in ready bespoke."

Mrs. Donovan rose to depart, the sisters (Rhoda and Mitty) accompanied their guests into the old hall. The last words to Mrs. Donovan were whispered into her ear by Gabby, with an alarming serious air. The last words to Rhoda, came from Mitty, who, regardless of the chauffeur's blushes, screamed out :

"Now, whatever you do, don't throw me over about the flannel petticoats, *and* the flannel drawers !"

At Rahan, the ladies were joined before dinner by a certain Mr. Tom Bingham, a spruce little bachelor, with marked eyebrows, and a heavy red moustache. He was a neighbour, who farmed on a large scale ; and was an authority on racing, finance, and the local news ; a brisk, agreeable gossip, a hard man to hounds, and a capital amateur actor. Mr. Bingham seemed to be thoroughly at home at Rahan Court, and on excellent chaffing, cavilling, argumentative terms, with its mistress ; his shrewd grey eyes critically appraised the English guest—a pale, ladylike young woman, who seemed rather dull and silent.



said Mrs. Donovan good-naturedly.

"I know somebody, who will cut out most girls,"
said Mr. Bingham, casting a sly glance at his hostess
—who accepted the compliment with a complacent
laugh, and threw a crumb at the flatterer.

After dinner, the trio sat down to play "cut-throat."

Miss Kyle, who was absent-minded and distrait, went "no trumps," when it should have been "spades"—"spades," when she held four aces; and was justly mulcted to the amount of fifteen shillings; and with these fifteen shillings in his pocket, and a good cigar, Tom Bingham took a reasonably early *congé*.

The third day at Rahan was made notable by the departure of Parker, who had taken counsel with Mrs. Donovan's maid, and recklessly waived a month's wages. Nothing—not even cart-ropes—would drag her back to Lismoyle. *

"And, indeed," she added, "in such a hole as that, no maid was required. Miss Kyle would soon learn to do her own hair, and as for dress——!" Here words entirely failed her.

Mrs. Donovan viewed this move, with serene approval.

"I'm glad she's going off on her own account, and without any fuss," she remarked. "She would have been a thorn in your side at Lismoyle. I know her sort! She will return to London, and pick up some smart woman going to Scotland. Once there, she will groan, and cast up her eyes, and talk of the savages over in Ireland. I'll send her in to Kilbeggan in the car; she can catch the mail at the junction, and a good riddance."

Exit Parker.

Captain Conroy rode over to Rahan about teatime. He looked to great advantage in the saddle, as he had a graceful seat, and seemed to be part and parcel

of his shiny bay thoroughbred. His errand was to Rhoda; he brought her several letters, which he handed over, as soon as he had dismounted.

"You'll stay to dinner of course, Niel?" said Mrs. Donovan. "I'll send for your clothes," and she moved towards the bell.

"No, I can't possibly," he replied. "I've letters to write—a sackful." Then turning to Rhoda: "How are you getting on, Miss Kyle?"

"Very well indeed," she murmured, but she scarcely glanced at him. She felt overwhelmed with embarrassment when she remembered how she had taken his house by storm, and utterly refused to be dislodged; and that it was, her aunt—her nearest relative—who was chiefly responsible for his present poverty.

"Niel, I can't think, why you are always so desperately busy," grumbled Mrs. Donovan. "Other people can dine out; last night we had Tom Bingham."

"Oh; and so now you know *all* the news!"

"Yes, thank you, and Miss Kyle will be his latest."

"But why should I blaze into publicity?" protested Rhoda. "Surely one girl more or less, cannot make any difference."

"It all depends," replied Mrs. Donovan. "Strange to say, we have not many young girls—but showers of old ones. I am really sorry for them. The boys are always started out in life; their sisters left at home, with never a glimpse of a lover, or a chance to see the world. Look at those seven Miss Parsons—I call it downright pathetic—and the three Moores."

"Well, I can't fancy any fellow falling in love with one of them," said Conroy. "They look like men in petticoats!"

"In skirts," corrected Mrs. Donovan; "there's no such thing as petticoats now." Then turning to Rhoda: "Those Miss Moores we saw yesterday, are the hardest riders in the country—I mean the two eldest. Nice light weights, and hardly a whole bone between them. And talking of bones, Niel, I should like you to come out with me and just run your hand down Tomboy's off fore-leg."

He rose at once with alacrity, and they left the rooms together, discussing "firing, and blisters."

Thus deserted, Rhoda went to a table and began to look over some newly-arrived illustrated papers, but her attention wandered. She could not concentrate her mind on fashionable news, her thoughts were away in the stables with her hostess, and her adviser. She had an uncomfortable facility, for discovering hidden situations, and to her, it was plain as daylight, that Mrs. Donovan was warmly interested in Captain Conroy. She had suspected it, from the way she continually dragged his name, his doings, merits, and opinions, into the most commonplace conversation; and now she noticed a sort of eagerness and anxiety in her manner—an expression of her face, that told its own eloquent tale! Mrs. Donovan was rich—possibly immensely rich—but must be at least fifteen years Captain Conroy's senior. When she first came to live at Rahan, he was a boy of ten. These instances of the

infatuation of a middle-aged woman, for a man many years her junior were not unknown, and in the case of Niel Conroy, the situation held enormous temptations. With the widow's wealth, he would be free from all debts, and difficulties; at liberty to enjoy racing, hunting, and the fullness of life to his heart's content. It appeared to Rhoda, that the attraction was chiefly on the woman's side; Captain Conroy treated Mrs. Donovan in a chaffing, friendly style, as a good comrade, and an old friend—that was all, so far. But what a lure was wealth!

In a surprisingly short time, Rhoda heard his voice in the hall, taking leave of "Lyddy"—with a hearty reassurance, respecting a splint. He did not forget to come and say good-bye to her, as she stood in the window of the drawing-room. As he held her hand for a moment, he looked at her with his steady blue eyes, and said:

"Remember, you are only on loan to Mrs. Donovan! As soon as Madame returns, we shall expect you at Lismoyle."

Having made this civil speech, he went out, mounted his flighty bay, passed through an open gate in the pleasure-grounds, and in another moment was galloping across the park.

Mrs. Donovan came and shared the window; leaned her ponderous hand on Rhoda's shoulder, and watched in silence the disappearing horseman. Then, as she turned away to pick up the *Queen*, the girl caught a heavy, half-stifled sigh.

CHAPTER XIV

THE next morning, as Rhoda was seated at the grand piano in the drawing-room, trying over some new music, she was unaware of an opening door, and started when she heard a voice exclaim :

" Ah, the darling ! And will she ever forgive her wicked, wicked, auntie ? "

Looking up, she beheld a pretty, slim lady, in flying scarf, and nodding feathers, fluttering towards her with outstretched hands. In another second her aunt was upon her ! her arms entwined about her neck, covering her face with rapturous kisses.

" Dear child ! " and she paused, gasping ; " I've treated you so badly, that you ought to *murder* me. Welcome at last ; welcome a million times ! Niel sent me a wire and a letter, and I came down late last night, and drove straight over here in the donkey-cart." Then pausing and holding her niece at arm's-length, surveyed her steadily. Rhoda was not at her best, she was still a little pale, a little sobered by the varied experiences of the last few days. " No, you're not a bit like your mother ; except, maybe,

your mouth, and eyebrows. Well, as I was saying, —Tom, the house horse, is drawing hay, so Niel offered us Black Monday, but I'm not tired of life yet! So I took the little donkey-trap, and borrowed Coneen's ass. He thinks I've stolen it. I left him bawling in the yard!—and here I am," and she looked excessively proud of herself.

"It was very good of you to hurry off like that, Aunt Kathleen. I'm afraid, I've put everyone out most dreadfully."

"Nonsense, dear child. Not a bit—not a bit. We like it. My, what a grand English accent you have! The whole affair was my fault. They say there's just one thing I'm good at making—and that's a mistake." And she laughed—she had a delightful rippling sort of laugh. "Doatie has come too. She is dying to see you. She has just gone round to put up the ass. You know, you and she are about the same age. To think, I overlooked your arrival, after having my head full of nothing else, and the house cleaned down, and meaning to bring a fine salmon from Dublin—and borrow Lyddy's car."

"It's all right now, Aunt Kathleen. Mrs. Donovan has been more than hospitable."

"Why, of course she has! There never were two words to that. Now that I look at you again, you have a likeness to poor Rosaleen; so has Doatie, and here she comes!" as a tall girl, with pale reddish hair, lounged into the room,—leaving the door wide open behind her.

"Well; and so you have arrived before we were ready for you!" she began in a plaintive brogue, offering, as she spoke, a cold, limp hand, and gazing into Rhoda's face, with intent, critical, scrutiny.

"Kiss one another, girls," commanded Madame; "you are near relations, next door to sisters. Come! None of your stand-off airs," and thus enjoined, Doatie offered her cousin a flabby, uncertain salute.

"We expected you this next Tuesday," she continued in an aggrieved drawl. "And the Mum and I had——"

"Now, Doatie," interrupted her parent, "the whole thing was my fault. You can go to a subscription dance at the Café Cairo another time. My dear Rhoda, you have a poor, unfortunate aunt, with no head; and before I forget it, Niel told me to say that he would fetch you in the dog-cart this evening."

"Wasn't it too funny, you and Niel at Lismoyle all alone?" broke in Doatie. "I'd have given a pound, to have seen his face when you turned up."

"He didn't even know I was expected!" rejoined Rhoda, looking over at her aunt with deeply reproachful eyes.

"Another of my mistakes!" admitted Madame gaily. "I thought I told him. I often make sure I've done things that I've overlooked; and then again, I do things that I never intended. To tell you the truth, I believe it's a sort of mental disease."

"I say—what a lovely frock!" exclaimed Doatie, who had been inspecting her cousin's embroidered

linen with an appreciative eye. "You didn't get *that* for nothing! I hear you've left dozens of them at Lismoyle. I may tell you, that I'm awfully fond of dress."

"Yes, and you racket through your finery in no time," supplemented her mother.

"The same to you, Mumsy. We are both hard on clothes."

Rhoda glanced at their toilettes—expensive town costumes, a little faded and spotted, but the *tout ensemble* was effective. Doatie's white and apple green suited her tawny hair, and exquisitely fair skin. Her mother, who wore white and lilac, was generously endowed with the particular order of good looks, that are seen to equal advantage in a flannel dressing-gown, or a *manteau de cour*! A perfectly-shaped face, small, regular features, lovely eyes—half smiling, half pathetic—a slim, girlish figure, and even at forty-four, a beautiful, unwrinkled complexion. As Rhoda gazed into the smiling countenance, shaded by its feathered hat, she told herself, that rarely had she seen anyone so pretty as her own aunt, Kathleen Conroy.

"Oh, here's Lyddy," said Madame, rising and hurrying to meet her. "It was just like you, you angel" (sound of violent kisses) "to come to the front, and take charge of my poor orphan; although I must tell you—and, indeed, you know it yourself—that Niel is as proper, and strait-laced, as any old maid."

"That is to say, as far as *you* can see," amended

Mrs. Donovan, with a particularly knowing wink. "Still waters run deep! How can you tell, how he carried on in India, eh? Well, my dear, I'm only too pleased to have Miss Kyle, and I'd like to keep her myself."

"No, no; she's coming back to-day. Suppose you bring her over, and dine? Now, *do*," urged Madame; "a little dinner in honour of Rhoda. I'll send up one of the grooms, and collect the Rector and Mrs. Blake, and maybe Tommy Bingham—just pot luck, you know!"

"No, thank you, Kitsey. I have the lady in custody, and I won't let her go for a couple of days. I will give the little dinner. Do you all come here to-night. Tell Niel no excuse will be accepted. I'll send the car for you, and to take you home. Now, consider that settled."

"All right, we shall be delighted," agreed her friend.

"Indeed, it's just as well, Mum," said Doatie. "I don't believe there's *half* a dinner in the house. I heard Bessie say, that owing to this hot weather, she was very tight in meat."

"Well, well, well! We can only do our best. It will be like old times, Rhoda," sitting down and taking her hand. "Short commons! D'you know, your mother and I were frightfully poor. Just the daughters of a broken-down gentleman of family. But you can't live on family—no more than you can on scenery. We lived in a tumbledown old place,—thanks be to Providence, not far from a cavalry

barrack,—and your mother and I, had a reputation for our looks—they called us ‘the modern Gunnings’—and the men just poured in in showers. Many’s the time we were distracted to get rid of them before dinner. They would sit on and on, hoping, maybe, to be asked,—as a nice change from mess. But your mother was the clever one, and full of ideas ; when it got near seven o’clock, she told the cook to open the door into the hall, and fry a few onions—that with the clatter of plates always sent them flying ! Of course, we’d have loved to have kept them, but how could we set full-grown men down to just tea, and a boiled egg ? ”

“ I’m sure it wasn’t for the *dinner* they came,” declared her niece.

“ No, darling, you’re right there ! Two of them came for *us*. Sangster carried me off, and Kyle your mother ; though I don’t believe there was four hundred a year among the four of us ! We always thought Captain Kyle was rich—he had such a lot of horses, and a beautiful high dog-cart with red wheels ; but when it came to the pinch, sure, he turned out to be as poor as a rat ! But never mind, Rhoda ! He was very handsome and amusing and nice, and that made up for his want of money.”

“ Yes, Aunt Kathleen, and when you have time, I want you to tell me all about him.”

“ I will to be sure. Oh, we had happy days those times—such dancing, and picnics, and fun, and no grand preparations. Afterwards came trouble. There

was I a widow at two-and-twenty, and Rosaleen in her grave in India."

"The Mum has one of her reminiscent fits on," remarked Doatie, who, with her back to the company, had been contemplating herself in a long mirror. "And what's the good of it? It's all over and done with—every dog has his day—you've had *yours*, Mum!"

"I suppose you're right," replied her mother, with a sigh; "but we like to remember the time when we were young and gay. Well, Lyddy—we will all meet this evening, and I must be off now, or that child Coneen will be tearing the place down!"

The donkey-cart was sent for, and arrived, but Madame's last words were so eloquent and endless, that at last her daughter was obliged to lead her forcibly down the steps,—and presently they jogged away.

"There's your aunt for you!" said Mrs. Donovan, as she and Rhoda stood looking after them. "One of the most attractive and delightful of women, with a beautiful face; but as she tells you herself—*no* head. You did not expect her to be so pretty?"

"No, indeed, or to look so amazingly young."

"And gay—eh? Trouble just runs off her like water on a duck's back. You may notice she has very few lines and wrinkles, and no matter what rag she throws on, she looks well. Kitty's so taking and animated, and persuasive, I'm astonished she hasn't married again. Doatie is not a patch on her mother."

"Nor I on mine," said Rhoda. "For instance, my nose is not what it ought to be."

"Oh, you are not too bad," said Mrs. Donovan, turning to survey her. "Not perhaps as good-looking as Doatie, who would be all right, only for her small eyes, and prominent teeth; but you have more style. Indeed, I'd sooner choose your looks myself!" and having presented her companion with this doubtful compliment, Mrs. Donovan went indoors.

* * * * *

The party from Lismoyle arrived ten minutes late for dinner. "It's generally half an hour," muttered the hostess, as she rose to receive her guests.

The two ladies were in full toilettes, clinging Empire gowns, and long (rather soiled) white gloves.—Apparently at the last moment, Madame had stuck a black feather in her hair, at an angle which on anyone else would have had a ludicrous effect, but she carried it off delightfully.—Mrs. Donovan was magnificent in a rose brocade tea-gown,—cut recklessly low,—Rhoda by contrast looked pale and insignificant, in a little black restaurant frock.

Madame, bubbling over with excuses and delight with her motor drive, had talked herself into the room.

"Oh, my dear, such a luxury after the donkey-trap! By the way, when I got back, it was long after one o'clock, and Coneen had gone home roaring and crying to tell his mother. It seems he had a lot

of parcels for delivery, and the Rectory people were having the Bishop to lunch, and never got their joint ! Of course, it's all put down to *me*," and she laughed, and shrugged her graceful shoulders, with heartless unconcern.

Meanwhile Niel had seated himself by Rhoda, and inquired :

" Are you returning with us after dinner ? "

" No, not for a day or two, thank you."

" We are all ready for you now—and——"

" Dinner, dinner," interrupted his hostess, tapping him sharply on the arm. " You sit in your usual place, Niel, and mind you make yourself agreeable."

" Don't I always do that—or, at least, my poor best ? "

" Not at all—I've seen you very black, and silent."

" Oh, that was only at home, at our own table," put in his step-mother with a giggle, " when there was nothing fit to eat ! "

Captain Conroy took his place (apparently as a matter of course) opposite the hostess, and proceeded to start conversation. The talk was of the approaching Horse Show, and Leopardstown Races ; presently it veered nearer home, and touched on the scandalous price of eggs, the scarcity of water, and Tom Bingham's new motor-car.

" Tommy tells me," said Mrs. Donovan, " that a rich man, a Mr. Brander from the Argentine, has taken the Manders' place for hunting, and intends to look round for a wife."

"Two birds with one stone, and what a chance for some of our girls!" said Madame vivaciously.

"I believe he's about fifty."

"Then there is no chance for *him*," announced Doatie. "I'll never be an old man's darling!"

Mrs. Donovan looked at her gravely, and said:

"You might as well wait till you're asked, my dear!"

"I'd never let him get as far as that," retorted Doatie, unabashed. "I've no patience with these elderly men with curled-up moustaches, and smart clothes, playing at being young—like Tommy Bingham. I can't bear him, with his sharp eyes and his sharp tongue. He's the greatest gossip in the county. Talk of women!"

"I see there's no love lost between you and Tommy," said Mrs. Donovan, now taking the lead in conversation. Rhoda noticed, that she addressed almost all her remarks to her *vis-à-vis*; indeed, so much so, that it almost gave the impression of a *tête-à-tête*. "Have you heard this, Niel?" and "Did you hear that?" was frequently on her lips.

"Do you know, that it's a couple of months since you dined here," she said, in a reproachful key.

"Yes, but I've been so frightfully busy these fine long evenings, making hay while the fine weather lasts. However, this, I understand," glancing at Rhoda, "is a special occasion."

"Not much of a compliment to *me*!" said the hostess fiercely.

"Oh, I say! Surely, Lyddy, you and I, are too old friends to bother about such nonsense," with which remark, she was immediately mollified, and raising her glass, pledged him "good luck, and good health."

When dinner was over and coffee appeared, the ladies remained in the dining-room, to smoke with the solitary man—who had been provided with an excellent cigar. Later on, they moved in a body to the drawing-room, where a bridge-table was set out.

"You might sing something, Kitsey," suggested her friend, as she opened the piano, and Madame Conroy, laying aside her cigarette, sat down, and began to play the accompaniment of "Savourneen Deelish." She had a sweet, thrilling and surprisingly young voice. To listen was a pure delight.

"That was a great favourite with your mother," twisting round, as soon as she concluded, "I hope you liked it? Now I'll give you something French."

"Oh, I know your French songs!" declared her hostess. "Colonel Barton of the 'Piebalds' told me, they were so extraordinarily seductive, that he had to run away and hide."

"What utter balderdash! Well, I hope you will not be shocked at 'My Little Grey Home in the West.'"

"No, no, do sing that.—In fact, sing anything you like." And she sang delightfully. Her voice was wonderfully—fresh—and sweet. Here, thought Rhoda, was a charming and accomplished aunt. What a pity,

that one spiteful fairy had come to the christening, and said: "You shall have beauty, grace, charm and perennial youth—but no *sense*!"

"Come, now, that will do, Mumsy," said Doatie, putting her hands on her mother's shoulders. "They want to start bridge. Lyddy is dying to begin, and I'll take your place. I don't care to play unless for money, and Niel won't risk even fivepence a hundred; so I'll just have a practice. This Bluthner is such a treat, after our own old tin kettle." And as she concluded, she lifted her mother almost bodily from the music-stool.

Mrs. Donovan, who was already sorting the cards, said: "You and I as partners, Niel. Rhoda will play with Kitsey," and in less than five minutes they were all absorbed in "auction."

Remarkable to state, Madame Conroy had a capital memory for cards, and was undoubtedly an experienced player. At the same time, she was inclined to be reckless, and to take extraordinary risks; fortunately, there was no money in question. They were playing for "love," as Mrs. Donovan remarked with a flashing glance at her partner. It made Rhoda feel painfully uncomfortable, to see one of her own sex, paying such unmistakable attention to an obviously indifferent young man; but then, perhaps, he was much more forthcoming, and responsive, when they were quite alone? Mrs. Donovan was a moderate bridge-player, but believed otherwise; and in spite of some flagrant mistakes, continually

corrected and lectured her companions. Madame argued and protested, with enviable good temper, but Niel, cool, prompt, and decisive, entirely ignored his partner's strictures, even when she scolded him sharply, and declared that he had let her down three tricks—doubled—and lost three hundred!

Meanwhile at the piano, Doatie was enjoying herself immensely, singing song after song with a piercing, harsh soprano, that had in it something of the strain of a peacock's wailing cry. Occasionally her mother would put her pretty fingers to her ears, and exclaim:

"Oh, Doatie darling, don't, *don't!*"

But "Doatie darling," remorselessly sang on.

Mrs. Donovan was not musical. She had no ear, and boldly confessed that she had once stood up at "Rule Britannia" in mistake for "God Save the King." But Captain Conroy was more sensitive; and when the notes of the songstress became too excruciating, his lips were firmly set, as if he were enduring some acute physical torture.

During the deals, Madame's tongue was never still.

"I've made your room so cosy," she said, nodding over at her niece. "I brought down a new toilet set, a little table, and a basket chair, and had the world's work to get them on the cab in Dublin. You shall have the worth of your money, my dear!"

Niel, who was dealing, paused, cards in hand, and gave his step-mother a look of stern interrogation. But she merely answered in her lightest tone:

"Hurry up, now, Niel! Give me a good hand

this time. I'm sick of Yarboroughs. You and Lyddy have all the cards."

At ten o'clock the party broke up, in spite of the hostess's almost passionate entreaties.

"I've to be off to a fair at six o'clock to-morrow morning," said Niel, "but if Madame and Doatie like to stay on a bit, I'll walk home."

"It's positively ridiculous the way you slave," protested Mrs. Donovan. "You'll be an old man before your time."

"Well, I feel an old man, anyhow."

"What! At thirty," she exclaimed. "Thirty last month."

"Oh, he only means, that he has an old head on young shoulders," put in his step-mother playfully. "I think myself, that all his spirits were melted out of him in the heat of India. He used to be such a wild, harum-scarum boy; up to any amount of mischief," and she moved towards the door.

While Captain Conroy was putting on his coat, and Mrs. Donovan was offering assistance, and urging him to have a peg, Madame beckoned to her niece, and said:

"You help me on with my cloak, lovey. Isn't it a beauty?"

(It certainly was. A white and silver brocade, trimmed with ermine.)

"Come over here," she added mysteriously, and she drew Rhoda behind one of the yellow marble pillars, "I have a word for your ear alone."

"Yes, Aunt. What is it?"

"It's about the money," she whispered. "The five guineas a week. It's a regular windfall, darling; but never let on about it, to Bryda or to Niel. He's most frightfully proud, and wouldn't touch a penny—badly as it's wanted. But *I'll* find a way of making it useful; it will be an enormous help. Do you just pay it over to me monthly in advance, by cheque, and," putting her finger to her lips she added: "keep it a dead secret."

"Very well, Aunt Kathleen, that will be all right. I should hate to feel that I was costing a farthing."

"Now remember we expect you in a day or two. Ah, there's Niel shouting. Good-night, dear," kissing her warmly on both cheeks.

Then with a hurried farewell to her hostess, Madame gathered up her skirts, tripped down the steps with the lightness and alacrity of sixteen, and scrambled into the car beside her daughter.

CHAPTER XV

THREE days later, Rhoda found herself rolling up the avenue to Lismoyle, accompanied by Mrs. Donovan (who never let slip an opportunity of paying the place a visit). Round a curve they came upon a stooping figure, which, when erect, proved to be a pretty, dark girl, with an open, eager face, and a brilliant complexion.

"So you're home, Bryda," cried her neighbour.

"Yes, I arrived last night. And this must be Rhoda?" standing on the step of the car, and holding out her hand.

"You see, I'm bringing her safely back to you. What have you been about, grovelling on your knees?"

"I'm looking for Madame's keys. She thinks she dropped them, when she ran down to catch the mail-car."

"Not the house keys?" and Mrs. Donovan's voice was tragic.

"Yes; she took them over from Bessie."

"And as likely as not she's given them to the post-man! What are you all doing to-day?"

"Madame is in bed, Doatie is dressmaking, and Niel is in the oat-field."

"Oh, then," rising as she spoke, "I'll just get down and go round; I've something I want to say to him. You two girls take on the car, the luggage is following."

As Mrs. Donovan spoke, she descended heavily, then made her way to an iron gate on the left, and Bryda succeeded to her place.

"I'm so glad to see you," she said, taking Rhoda's hand, "and so sorry, that you've had such a bandying about from post to pillar. I don't know *what* you must think of us—arriving here, and not finding a soul to receive you. Niel said when he first saw you, he felt turned to stone."

"Well, yes," replied Rhoda, with a laugh, "I think he was; and I don't wonder, when he found an absolutely strange girl in possession of his house."

"Here we are," said Bryda; "come in. The car can go round and wait for Mrs. Donovan. When she talks farming with Niel, she never knows when to stop. Now you must pay your respects to Madame, and then see your room."

Rhoda found her aunt still in bed, supported by large pillows, and absorbed in a new novel. She looked charming, in a becoming lace cap, but her room was in considerable disorder. The wardrobe stood wide, the dressing-table was a litter of brushes, veils, powder-puffs and dead flowers: one window was propped open with a smart shoe (which was

evidently suffering for its good nature), the other was supported by a small folding chair.

"So you've come at last, dear girl!" exclaimed Madame, "and here is your lazy aunt still in bed. But I've nothing to do in the mornings, and I do love my bed, and a good novel. This is so thrilling I cannot leave it, and that's all the fault of the writer. Bryda, did you find the keys? Big Jane is waiting for the soap and starch."

"Keys? No, not a sign of them."

"There's for you, now! Well, give Coneen sixpence, and see what he can do." Then, turning to her niece: "I suppose Lyddy brought you over?"

"Yes, in the car."

"Where is she?—why didn't she come up to see me?"

"She's gone out to where they are cutting oats," said Bryda. "She wanted to speak to Niel."

"Oh, did she?" And Madame laughed, and hid her face roguishly between the pages of the novel. Presently she peeped out, and said: "Rhoda, I see you are admiring my window-props. My dear, those sashes are broken since last Christmas—and I can't get anyone to mend them."

"Have you sent for the carpenter?" inquired Bryda.

"Well, if I didn't, I thought I did! This room of mine, is just boarded with good intentions. By the way, darling, why are you called 'Rhoda'? What has become of Rosaleen, your baptismal name?"

"Grandpapa disliked it,"—began the girl.

"Oh, of course," interrupted her aunt. "Just because it was Irish—the old ogre!"

"But I believe 'Rhoda' is the Greek for 'Rose,'" continued her niece.

"Well, he had no business to translate you into a dead language, and give you an ugly name. Why not change now?"

"It's too late, I'm afraid."

"Not a bit of it! I've changed my name twice—from Lynch to Sangster; and Sangster to Conroy; and have done more than that, without turning a hair! O'Conroy is the real name. 'The O'Conroy and Madame O'Conroy'—such a mouthful to follow into a room! Before we were married, I coaxed your uncle to drop the extra. He was very loath to do it; and made a terrible fuss about his old 'O,' and said it would be lost and forgotten. But I told him, '*nought*' was never in danger! Wasn't that smart? and I had 'Conroy' printed on my visiting-cards. Well now, darling, make yourself at home. Bryda will show you the run of the place. She's the boss." And with a gesture of farewell, Madame resumed her book.

At this moment Bessie entered with a bunch of keys. Holding them up, she said:

"I found them in the umbrella-stand, Madame, inside your parasol."

"You are a clever searcher, Bess—what a loss to Scotland Yard! I can't remember anything about them. As you're here, please get my bath, and you two girls be off. I'm really and truly going to rise."

Thus dismissed, Bryda and Rhoda withdrew, and proceeded to 'the den,' a bare, shabby old room, its floor and tables, strewn with scraps, materials, fashion books, and paper patterns. Here they discovered Doatie, an untidy figure, in an old skirt, and flimsy blouse,—minus many hooks. Her mouth was full of pins, and in her right hand she brandished a formidable pair of scissors, with gaping blades.

"I'm dressmaking," she explained, as soon as she was able to speak. "Good-morning, Rhoda! I'm just taking the pattern of your white cloth coat and skirt," and she pointed with the scissors to a crumpled heap upon the sofa. "I knew you wouldn't mind."

"Oh, no, of course not," assented her cousin mendaciously. (Rhoda was naturally neat, and hated to have her things rumpled or pawed about; but under the present circumstances, what could she do, or say?)

"I'm copying this in some rather nice stuff I got in Dublin. It will look ripping, and come in for the tennis tournament next week. *This* time, I intend to carry all before me!"

"Doatie is a professor," said Bryda; "she has won a lot of tennis prizes, and she is not at all a bad amateur dressmaker."

"I'm glad to hear you think I can do *something*!" she sneered.

"Well, come along, Rhoda, and see your room," said Bryda, as she took her by the arm. "I think you will find it improved."

"You can't improve away the rats!" Doatie screamed after them.

"Don't mind Doatie," said Bryda, halting in the corridor. "She's only saying that to frighten you. She's just a wee bit jealous."

"Not of me, surely?" protested her cousin.

"Well, you see, Madame has been making rather a fuss, and talk, about your coming."

"And yet your brother never knew!"

"Oh!" colouring, and looking confused. "It was to Bessie and Doatie. She just sees Niel at dinner-time, that's all; and Doatie being the only girl——"

"Except you," interrupted Rhoda.

"I'm the housekeeper, and I don't count. Although I'm out all day, I very seldom go out—and three in the tub-car with the man, will be rather a crush, driving to tennis and parties. Then you have such pretty frocks—frocks are her craze—and poor Doatie can't help being a wee bit envious."

"I don't want to go out," protested Rhoda. "I've not come here for society, but, on the contrary, to get away from it. Pure country air, and rest, is what Doctor Ambrose preached."

To think of herself squashed up in the tub-car with her aunt and Doatie, jogging miles and miles to deadly little tennis-parties—she, who had turned her back on all social temptations—the idea was too absurd!

"If I may poke about with you, and garden, and look for eggs, and lie in the hammock, I shall be all right."

"Oh, we can do more for you than that!" said Bryda. "There will be tennis. The courts are not half bad; and now and then you could ride if you liked. Here is your room," opening the door, as she spoke.

The shabby room seemed to welcome the guest, and was undoubtedly improved; it had now something of a home-like appearance, despite its tall and very bare windows. Bryda sat down on the new basket chair, while Rhoda removed her hat.

"I'd like to tell you one or two things, if I may," she began rather nervously.

"Say on!" replied the other, with a dramatic gesture, and a smile.

"You won't be offended, will you? Promise!"

"Offended? No, why should I?"

"It seems rather early days to offer advice, but this is a case of 'the sooner the better,' or 'a stitch in time saves nine.' In the first place, lock up your frocks and pretty things, and don't let Doatie get hold of them. She believes in the community of goods—that is to say, other people's goods."

"Yes, I understand; thank you. And I see you have given me a fine wardrobe with a key."

"And," continued Bryda, "don't lend Madame any money—it's like pouring water into a sieve. With respect to money, she is quite irresponsible, and cannot help buying for buying's sake; very often, quantities of flimsy rubbish, and crazy hats, that she scarcely looks at again! I believe she is seized with a sort of mania, the moment she enters a shop;

even if it's a greengrocer's, she feels that she *must* order half the things she sees! As for a draper's!—it's hopeless to control her. Here in the country, there's no immediate temptation; but now and again she gets an attack of 'shop fever,' and flies to Dublin, or Cork."

"I'll remember your hints, and take your kind advice as it is meant; and, indeed, I won't have much money to spare for loans."

"It sounds horrid, but, do you know, I'm rather glad. You're just one of our own sort; Niel shrivels up when he gets among wealthy people—not from envy, but he feels out of his element. He has never known what it was to have enough money in all his life."

"Then what about Mrs. Donovan? I saw no sign of 'shrivelling' the day he dined with her."

"Oh, we're accustomed to Lyddy—and she's an old friend."

Rhoda was debating with herself whether she would not ask Madame to let her off her promise, and tell Bryda of the five guineas a week, when the door opened, and Bessie thrust in her head, and said:

"Miss Bryda, there's a woman here with five young turkeys; she's asking two shillings each," and Bryda vanished.

* * * * *

In a surprisingly short time, the new arrival had established herself at Lismoyle, and become, so to speak, one of the family. Bryda, the practical and industrious, was the real mistress of the house.

Madame's air of complete detachment, and easy evasion of all responsibility, astonished and distressed her niece. She and Bryda breakfasted early with Niel, who, except on Sundays, rarely appeared before dinner-time. Madame and Doatie had their meal later,—as they declared that “the morning was long enough without making it endless, by rising at cock-crow!” On the other hand, the morning was too short for Bryda; the housekeeping had to be seen to, the larder to be inspected; there were interviews with various people—notes, the hens, the garden, the dusting of china, and the making out of bills.

The new-comer clamoured eagerly for tasks, and was promptly set to work to pick fruit, to collect and date eggs; instructed in the art of covering jam-pots, and arranging flowers, and became, after a few days' practice, a most willing, and useful helper. Rhoda was amazed at her own adaptability!—her hitherto undeveloped taste, not to say appetite—for country life! She positively enjoyed sitting on her heels, and turning up the rich dark earth with a trowel, raking, planting, watering, weeding, and gathering the still warm eggs from sundry nests;—the novelty exercised a positive charm! Occasionally, as a treat, going round the loose boxes with Bryda, and distributing carrots to the sleek-coated horses, listening to their feats, and separate histories, from Tim, the head groom—a little man with a perpetual straw in his mouth, who had never been known to give a direct answer, in the whole course of his life.

Madame was demonstratively kind and affectionate to her niece; loaded her with endearments and caresses, and told her many interesting facts about her own father and mother; to these, Rhoda listened with eager attention. But it was otherwise, when her aunt summoned her to sit with her in her bedroom of a lovely morning, and poured out her confidences and complaints, with breathless volubility.

"You see, darling, you're one of my own blood!" she explained, with a semi-apologetic air. "And sometimes I feel, that I must blow off the steam, or explode!"

She discoursed freely and frankly of Doatie, her daughter; deplored her restlessness, fretfulness, and passionate craving for amusement; and enlarged with untiring repetition, on her own vigorous efforts to get her married.

"Once or twice, I thought it was all right," said Madame plaintively; "but Doatie has such a terrible knack of doing the wrong thing, and giving herself away. I know, that a draggled petticoat choked off one man—and a practical joke another. I suppose a curate, or a subaltern, will have to be her fate!"

In her secret heart, Rhoda felt sincerely sorry for whichever of the twain, to whom the lot of such a wife might fall. Then Madame complained bitterly of Niel, of his stern temper, his reserve, and his saving ways.

"You may not believe me, but I can tell you, darling child, that he can make you tremble: and your teeth absolutely chatter in your head! You feel, as if you were some poor black that he was going

to shoot or flog. You'd never suppose, from his civil every-day talk, that Niel is as hard as a rock ; so different from his poor dear father ! Then there's Bryda, who sticks to her brother through thick and thin—whatever *he* says, is law. She's engaged to a penniless officer in India, and all the world here knows, that Micky Nolan would give his two ears to marry her. He has a fine place, and a large income—but rather a cast in one eye. Of course, the Nolans were only millers ; but when people's pockets are full of money, those sort of things are soon forgotten. As for Lyddy Donovan—we all know, what *she* wants ! ”

Here Madame, who was compelled to pause for breath, said to herself : “ What a very nice colour the child is getting ! So much for the Lismoyle air ! ”

“ The best thing Lyddy can do,” she resumed, “ is to marry Tom Bingham, a decent little fellow, and suitable in every way ; good-natured, good old family, connected with titled people (though no one would think it), and very comfortably off. He has been paying her a sort of quarrelsome attention, for the last five years.”

To all these, and many other confidences, Rhoda listened with shrinking distaste. Vainly did she endeavour to interrupt her aunt, or to turn the current of her talk. It was useless. These various disclosures, and confessions, continually bubbled up, like springs on a hill-side ; whether walking arm-in-arm in the garden, sitting by the tennis-court, or driving in the “ tub,” she was never safe from un-

welcome outpourings, till at last the unfortunate girl honestly dreaded being left alone with her relative. However, in spite of Madame's confidences, Doatie's querulous discontent, and stinging back-handers, she really enjoyed her existence. The good plain fare, early hours, and open air, had benefited her health; she now ate like a schoolgirl, and slept like an infant. Moreover, she felt curiously happy and stimulated, in the society of Bryda, and her brother.

* * * * *

Like some women who have a natural taste in dress, Madame's ideas, with regard to arranging a house, were deplorably deficient. She had no eye for good furniture, colour, or effect. Her drawing-room was a muddle of valuable old pieces, and modern rubbish: untidy basket-chairs, Chippendale settees, dyed pampas grass, delicate pastilles, and bazaar horrors. Bryda was powerless to interfere or inaugurate improvements. Here her step-mother posed as "the mistress of the house," but to a fashionable niece from London, she willingly gave *carte blanche*, to do as she pleased with the sitting-rooms.

Bryda and Rhoda, assisted by Bessie and Martin, worked with a will. Manchester draperies, lace-draped brackets, little tottering tables, were all exported to Miss Mitty for her next rummage sale. Now at last there was room to move; a generous space, from which one could admire Louis Seize furniture, graceful mirrors, and a real Aubusson carpet—(brought from the cook's bedroom, to which it had

been banished as an ugly, faded old thing). Rare coloured prints adorned the walls, and the cabinets no longer harboured "presents from Harrogate" or "Matlock," or vast pink and white shells; but exquisite specimens of rare Chelsea, and Sèvres—in short, the drawing-room was itself again! Many articles of value had been unexpectedly produced by Bessie; these she had concealed in one of the garrets, and covered with old carpets, for fear (as she expressed it) of their being "made away with." But now such a fate no longer threatened them. Among the rest of the salvage, she brought to light several family portraits, which were hung in the dining-room with imposing effect.

"They look really good," observed Rhoda, as she inspected them. "I'm sure one or two are by some great artist. The corpulent old man in uniform, and the lady with the basket on her head."

"Tell it not in Gath," said Bryda, "they are both copies. Our great-great-grandfather, who spent most of his time in London or Paris, sold the originals, though I fancy he did not get much for them, so long ago. If we only had them *now*!"

"I sincerely wish you had," echoed her friend.

As the two girls and their helpers, toiled, and arranged, and rearranged; hung pictures and lifted weights; from time to time Doatie would, slouch in, a scrap of dressmaking in her hand, and with the chilled shot of shattering criticism, endeavour to damp their ardour.

"So you've cleared out the room," she exclaimed on one occasion. "There aren't half enough chairs now. And you've done away with the pampas grass, and the nice chimney-piece drapery. I call those marble Cupids quite *indecent*. I don't know what the Moores will say to them! And if you ask me—I think the whole place looks hideous."

"Maybe we're not asking you, Miss Doatie," said Bessie, who was dusting out a cabinet.

"And so you've brought the picture which was over Rhoda's washstand," she continued, ignoring Bessie's existence. "And a mouldy old faded carpet—and a mouldy old chair from the laundry. The room is perfectly frightful."

"Oh, never fear it'll be all right, when we've *you* sitting in it, Miss Doatie," said Bessie over her shoulder. "No one will throw an eye to anything else, then."

"No one wants your opinion, you kitchen cat," cried Doatie. "You're much too free with that 'miaw' of yours." And in high dudgeon Miss Sangster stalked off, leaving as usual, the door wide open behind her.

There had always raged a secret but continuous warfare between her, and the old servant,—who looked on Madame's daughter as a thankless, troublesome interloper; and invariably greeted the young lady on her return to Lismoyle, with:

"Well, and did you do any good *this* time, Miss Doatie?"

CHAPTER XVI

A FORTNIGHT after her second arrival at Lismoyle, Rhoda received a letter, which disturbed her a good deal. It came from her aunt at Aix, and was evidently written at white-heat. It said :

“ DEAREST RHODA,

“ I have just had a most distracting communication from Parker, announcing, as I was already aware, that she had left your service ; but she volunteers much more information than this mere bald fact. Her description of your journey, and your arrival at Lismoyle itself, reads like one of Charles Lever’s novels. She assures me that the place is something between a lunatic asylum, and a poor-house ; that there are hardly any servants, and that the house is overrun with rats, as large as rabbits. Nor is this the worst ! Parker proceeds to tell me that there was no lady at Lismoyle, no evidence of the million welcomes, but a remarkably handsome young man received you (presumably a host in himself). And you and he, spent a day and a night together,

without a chaperon ! Darling child, as I write this I feel quite hysterical, and I can see Ada Marshall watching me over the *Times*, and possibly wondering if I am going to have some sort of fit. You never mentioned this deplorable episode in your letters, although you *did* tell me of the unexpected step-son. From all I can gather, I am afraid your aunt is not accountable for her actions, and instead of being entrusted with my precious niece, I should say that Madame Conroy is an uncertified lunatic, and urgently requires a keeper.

“ I could not possibly start for India and leave you in her hands, for I should be utterly miserable the whole time ; and even if the woman *is* sane, the establishment is totally unfitted for a delicate girl like you. Parker,—who writes, with a sort of grim relish,—assures me, that there are no carpets in the room, no doors or bell handles—and the dogs and poultry come in and out precisely as they please—and they always please. I must confess that I am no longer surprised, that your grandfather kept your Irish aunt at arm’s-length. How I wish that you had done the same ! I wonder where this letter will find you ? Perhaps again under the roof of the kindly widow. Do answer it at once, and tell me how you are, and what you propose to do. The Switzerland arrangement still remains open. But, indeed, dear child, when I think of the miseries and hardships you have endured, and *kept from me*, I feel inclined to give up the grand tour, go over to Ireland, and retrieve you

myself ; for, after all, you are my first object. So if you send me a wire to say ' Come,' I shall put myself into the first *train de luxe*, and you will see me within three days.

" Ever your loving, and most anxious Aunt,

" CHARLOTTE KYLE."

Her niece ran through this epistle with a heightened colour. Then read it over slowly, no less than three times. Finally she went up to her room, and dashed off a long reply, which she carried down to the lodge gate herself, and delivered into the hands of the mail-car driver, accompanied by one shilling.

The letter said :

" DEAREST AUNT CHAR,

" In the first place, I'm all right, and feel better than I've done for *ages*, so make your poor dear mind at ease. I will tell you all about myself, faithfully and truly, keeping nothing from you. If I were uncomfortable or miserable, don't you know your luxury-loving Rhoda well enough to realize, that she would not remain at Lismoyle half an hour ? My aunt, her daughter, and Bryda Conroy, are all here, so I have an ample supply of chaperons. As for the night when I arrived (a week before I was expected) I lay my hand upon my heart, and assure you most solemnly, that Captain Conroy was ten times more horrified, and frightened, than I was ! I think if I had not been particularly firm, he would have

bundled me out of the house. As it was, I was packed off early the next morning. However, when he discovered that I had been to India (he was in the 50th Bengal Lancers, the regiment we met at Bareilly), and that there wasn't a ha'porth of harm in me, he *thawed*, and we forgathered, and talked and smoked together, like the best of old friends. He is very good-looking, so is his sister Bryda. We have had a group snapshotted, and I will send you a copy, also a photograph of the castle. This house is called 'The Castle,' but the real one is away in a hollow in the demesne, a picturesque ruin, 'convenient' to the family burying-ground. Niel farms, and sells horses, and is absent all day. His sister Bryda and I are tremendous friends. She is marvellously energetic, and looks after the house and garden. I garden too—and love it—in an apron, and a pair of old gloves, and am already as brown as a berry.

“Now for the inmates of Lismoyle. I will begin with the servants—to take Parker's indictment categorically. Bessie, the housekeeper and Jack-of-all-trades, has been here for twenty-seven years. There is also a capital cook,—who is not above scouring,—a housemaid with one eye, and an elderly man-servant, who was born at the gate lodge. All these are excellent specimens of their class—which (by all accounts) will soon be extinct. There *are* carpets. I forgot to tell you, that I arrived in the middle of the spring-cleaning (in August); and there is an Aubusson in the drawing-room that would make

you weep with envy. The house is full of family treasures—mostly to be found in unexpected places. For instance, until lately, there was a lovely Moreland over my washstand, and three others on the back stairs.

“ I don’t think the Irish appreciated Parker, hence her unflattering sketch. I overheard Bessie telling Bryda, she had an ‘overly’ manner, and that ‘her face was enough to turn the milk!’

“ Last, but not least, I come to my aunt and cousin. Aunt Kathleen looks absurdly young, smart and pretty for her age,—admittedly forty-five. She is as slim as I am, has exquisite hands and feet, and is girlishly gay and vivacious, with a delicious mezzo-soprano, and most ingratiating manners. But—Madame is known over here, as ‘*a trainahaillia*,’ an Irish expression, which means a thoughtless, reckless, creature; and she is frightfully extravagant and fond of spending money—*anyone’s* money! Most affectionate, warm-hearted, and I believe fond of me. My cousin Dorothea (or Doatie), has neither her mother’s beauty, nor charm. She is twenty-four, tall, graceful, and chronically discontented. Her complexion is her strong point, tennis her speciality. She is feverishly greedy of amusement and excitement, a little peevish and irritable at home, and not *very* partial to her charming cousin, Rhoda Kyle! She and Aunt Kathleen go off in the ‘tub’ to tennis, afternoon dances, and various other junketings. I am content with a game at home, tea at the Rectory or Clonbeg,

and an occasional ride on a beautiful little bay mare called 'Darling.' I rise at half-past seven, breakfast at half-past eight, and am out almost all day long, walking, gardening, or lazing in the hammock, knitting socks, or reading novels. This air and change have already done me an enormous amount of good ; my face is so tanned, that I believe you would scarcely recognize me ; so dearest Aunt Char, put away all anxiety—I am well, well occupied, and very happy. Continue your grand tour, enjoy yourself, and write every mail a long letter, to your loving, and countrified

“ RHODA.”

Mrs. Kyle read this epistle eagerly, and put it down with a sigh of satisfaction ; once more she glanced over it, paused, and murmured in a speculative whisper “ *Niel.*”

The promised photograph reached her at Marseilles ; in fact, she found it awaiting her on board the *Malwa*. Yes, Lismoyle was undoubtedly an imposing residence. As for the group, which she contemplated with anxious interest, it consisted of five people—a beautiful woman on a garden seat, supported by Rhoda, and her cousin ; at the back, stood a pretty girl with marked eyebrows, and a remarkably good-looking young man, evidently her brother. What steadfast eyes, and firm, well-cut features ! The accessories of the picture, were three self-possessed dogs.

On the second day out from Marseilles, Mrs. Kyle exhibited the photograph to Mrs. Marshall, and invited her opinion.

"Who are they?" she inquired, putting up her pince-nez. "Oh, yes, I see. So that's the Irish aunt; how very attractive and young, she looks! And who is the handsome fellow?"

"Ada, do you know, I'm rather afraid of him! He is a Captain Conroy."

"Conroy," repeated Mrs. Marshall, raising her voice. "Come here, Jim, and look at this group. Do you recognize anyone?"

"Rhoda, of course," said Colonel Marshall, as he examined the photograph; "and, why, here is Conroy of the 50th Lancers. I knew him well—he was up with us in Pindi."

"What is he like?" asked Mrs. Kyle.

"Just like what you see, also a promising young fellow, a well-known polo-player, and a keen soldier. I've not met him for three or four years; I believe he had to go home, and take over his patrimony in Ireland; by all accounts, he found it in a most unsatisfactory condition—a big, useless place, and no money. His father had run through every farthing. If I'd been Conroy, I'd have chucked it instead of the Service. I've always thought of his fate, as a sort of dumb tragedy."

"And so he really is a nice fellow?" said Mrs. Kyle.

"'Nice' is not exactly the word that fits Conroy.

He is a sound, reliable chap, a good sportsman, and popular with men—but not what you might call a ladies' man, and he lets them see it too; he'd rather shoot, or fish for Marseer, than 'philander'; and yet I've no doubt that they all liked him. Some day I hope we may meet again," and he handed back the photograph, and walked away.

"You seem interested in the young man, Charlotte!" said her friend. "Will you tell me why?"

"I am interested, because I have an idea, that if ever my fastidious niece does marry, it will be somebody like this Captain Conroy."

"But what have you to go upon, my dear?"

"More than you would think! Imagine a London girl, embedded in the country, miles away from a town, no motor, no amusements, declaring that she's as happy as the day is long! I thought there must be a reason for Rhoda's raptures. Now I've seen him!" and she gave the photograph, an emphatic tap with her gold eyeglasses.

CHAPTER XVII

DOROTHEA SANGSTER had not inherited her parent's sunny nature,—no more than she had been endowed with her charming face, and thrilling voice. Secretly, she envied her cousin; envied her bitterly: her obvious enjoyment of the country, her aunt's affection, her popularity in the household, and with the dogs, and was distinctly affronted and resentful, when Rhoda refused to allow her to "run through her wardrobe," and confiscate loans, and patterns. Having received a civil and diplomatic excuse, Doatie became surprisingly pink—an unbecoming contrast to her reddish hair—as she said:

"Of course, Bryda put you up to this, just because I singed the front of her white satin with an iron. But you—my own cousin—well, I *did* expect you to be different!"

"Bryda has never said a word about her dress, I assure you, but I am tidy, and cannot bear to have my things pulled about, turned inside out, and tacked and pinned."

"You're just as bad as Niel, when I take his note-paper—or borrow his pens!"

"But," resumed Rhoda, "I will give you your choice of any two dresses—one evening, one afternoon—with pleasure!"

"You are not in earnest?" gasped Doatie.

"Yes, I am, of course; why not?"

"Oh, Rhoda, you are a brick! The grey and silver is absolutely the prettiest frock I have ever seen! I'll have *that* for one," and she suddenly seized her cousin by the shoulders, and covered her face with hot, dry kisses. Half an hour later, she emerged from Rhoda's bedroom, flushed and triumphant, laden with three dresses, several blouses, a hat, and a green silk petticoat,—for the moment, the happiest girl in Munster!

"There was no use in offering her shoes or gloves," remarked Bryda, who had assisted in the selection, and was now folding up various discarded costumes.

Rhoda was putting away her smartest frocks, as it seemed to her, that they were not in keeping with her rôle at Lismoyle. She now wore wash-leather gloves, her plainest skirts, and blouses, and kept her pearls under lock and key.

"Since you *are* scattering your wardrobe," continued Bryda, "if you've any trifle in the way of an old blouse or a scarf to spare, you would make Mary at the gate your friend till death."

"What? Martin's sister—the little elderly woman with the frizzy hair?"

"Yes; dress is her passion, though you would never suspect it. Long, long ago, she was someone's

maid, and acquired a rabid craze for clothes, which I'm sorry to say, I am unable to gratify. She keeps a sharp eye on all my wardrobe, such as it is! And when the other day I gave her a respectable blue serge, she received it doubtfully, and said:

"‘Oh, and the nice little grey gown you had the spring before last, Miss Bry—where is *that*?’"

"And she's not my only particular customer. Nan, the egg-woman, to whom I present garments, threw me back a petticoat with virtuous indignation, because, if you please—it had no tucks!

"‘I've always used a couple of tucks,’ she said, ‘they're more dressy; and I won't wear the sign of a skirt without one!’"

"I have a bird's-eye silk blouse that has done its work," said Rhoda, "and yet it's not too shabby. It is one of Estelle's, and I hope it will be fashionable enough for Miss Martin. I have also a somewhat *passé* feather boa; when I go down to the post-car this evening, shall I present them?"

"If you do, my dear, Mary will love you for ever and ever, and will be the envy of every woman in the place."

"Here are a couple of pairs of gloves that she might wear to Mass. They are too small for Doatie."

"That's true. Isn't it strange, that Madame's daughter, should have a hand like a lobster?"

"Oh, Bryda!" expostulated her friend, "what things you do say."

"Well, anyway, Doatie looked quite striking in that

ball-dress. I only hope these smart clothes will get her a partner for life."

"Do you think it would be desirable?"

"Yes. You know, Rhoda, I tell you things I never breathe to anyone else; and surely you can see for yourself, that Doatie and Niel don't hit it off. She gets on his nerves with her singing, her slang, and her tempers. Do you notice, that when she comes into a room and stays in it for any time, how somehow she upsets it, and gives it a sort of ravaged appearance? She never closes a door behind her, and grumbles by the hour. I believe she tells all her officer friends, how shamefully we pinch and screw, and are so mean, and shabby. Oh! if only someone would marry her!"

"Or *him*," suggested Rhoda. "Then he would have the house to himself."

"And what about me? How are you going to dispose of me, my heartless Kyle of Bute?"

"Bryda, you hypocrite! you ostrich! You don't tell me everything; but I know all about someone out in India."

"Who told you," she asked, blushing to her ears.

"Mrs. Donovan, Madame, yourself. I guessed the worst, when I saw his photograph on the little table with your Bible."

"Yes; but we may have to wait for years. I met him when I was at Cheltenham with Aunt Grace. She loves Jack."

"Oh, we all love Jack," quoted Rhoda with a laugh.

"And as for Niel," continued his sister, "he won't marry, though of course a wealthy wife would redeem the place, and take his neck out of the halter."

"But why won't he?" inquired Rhoda, gazing fixedly out of the window as she spoke.

"He's not that sort! he'd hate to marry a rich woman, and feel that he owed everything to *her*."

"But when he is so much attached to the place, he might be tempted to do what he hated, for the sake of Lismoyle."

"No, I think not. Not if I know my own brother," replied Bryda with emphasis. "A great prize might be dangled before his eyes—but he would never accept it."

Although Bryda and Rhoda were close friends, and Rhoda and her aunt were on affectionate terms, no love was lost between the cousins. They never hit it off, but jarred continually upon one another. Doatie disliked Rhoda's quick deftness, her little jokes, her fits of spontaneous laughter. To Rhoda, her relative was as irritating as a slamming door; her lazy self-indulgence disgusted her, also her untidiness, and her detestable habit of moping like a sick bird. For when there was nothing "on," as she expressed it, no excitement in view, no prospect of interesting callers, Doatie would sit with slack arms and a scowl on her face, staring into vacancy, a cheerful figure in a drawing-room! or, roused by violent

reaction, would scour the roads on her bicycle, hoping to pick up news,—or it might be an invitation, or an escort!

Volatile "Madame Butterfly" worked hard for her daughter's entertainment, and the "tub" car travelled far and near! There were also impromptu parties at home—tea and tennis—got up at an hour's notice—entailing a busy time for Bryda and Bessie, and even Rhoda. The Blakes came, and Lyddy, Tom Bingham, the little withered Miss Moores, and frequently two or three officers, who had motored over from their quarters, twenty miles away. On such occasions, Doatie, active, animated and noisy—(she declared that it was fashionable to be noisy)—dominated the entire company. She was in her element at a tennis-party; this was *her* hour, and, on the whole, these reunions—thanks to a charming hostess, and excellent refreshments—were a notable success.

Occasionally in the cool of the evening, Rhoda and Bryda would ride: sometimes in the demesne, sometimes along the shady roads and lanes. Rhoda soon discovered that careering through the fields on a young thoroughbred, was not precisely the same thing as cantering up and down the Row, on a well-mannered hack. Irish horses were excitable and uncertain. "Darling," for all her name, could be a hot-tempered handful. But Rhoda had a capital seat and lots of pluck, and after the first ride or two, she and her steed came to an amicable understanding. Doatie

highly disapproved of these rides, and did not hesitate to say so. In her heart, she grudged her cousin a pleasure which she was too cowardly to enjoy herself. Mrs. Donovan was another, who looked on this exercise with disfavour, and expressed a loud-voiced hope, that Miss Kyle "would not break Darling's knees, or give her a sore back,"—a hope, which Miss Kyle seconded with a saucy, not to say exasperating, smile.—One afternoon she overtook the two girls riding in a grassy breen, and addressing Rhoda from the top of her sixteen-two, weight carrier, said :

"My dear girl, I hope you won't mind my telling you, that you are a holy show upon a horse! Oh, yes," in answer to Rhoda's rising colour. "Of course I'm aware, that you used to 'tit up' and down, the Ladies' Mile; but over here it's another pair of shoes. Why you look, as if the little mare could do what she liked with you. Just see the lather she's in! You're driving her mad, with your heavy hands."

"Darling hasn't been out for two days," interposed Bryda. "That's the reason she's fretting. Rhoda's all right."

Rhoda herself made no remark. She was ten times too angry to speak.

"Mind you," continued Mrs. Donovan impressively, "you're on a mare, worth a hundred guineas, and if anything happened to her, you'd look rather foolish. If you take my advice, you'll give up the saddle; one of these days, it may give you up, and you might

be badly hurt." And with this formidable warning, Mrs. Donovan waved a masculine hand, and cantered on.

She rode admirably, for all her size,—a capital horse-woman, like most Australians ; indeed, she had been born and brought up on a run, and was accustomed to be among horses since she could toddle. To her, the girl looked so thin, and so fragile, in her long-skirted coat, and as if the young hot-tempered animal could easily overpower her ; but, as a matter of fact, Mrs. Donovan was mistaken ; all Rhoda lacked was practice, to become as notable an equestrian as herself ! Moreover, Mrs. Donovan's advice was not altogether disinterested. If Miss Kyle took to hunting, what about her own long *tête-à-tête* rides with Niel Conroy ? The leisurely jogs from cover to cover, the slow return in the twilight, with animated discussions of the day's sport—and on her side, those easy, intimate, confidential talks, to which he lent an apparently sympathetic ear. To Lyddy, it was ever a matter of supreme satisfaction to know, that Niel could seldom reach Lismoyle without passing her own gate. Undoubtedly it would have been a terrible blow to the lady, had she discovered, that on more than one occasion, Captain Conroy had made a *détour* of three or four miles, in order to elude her society.

* * * * *

On very rare occasions, the girls were joined by Niel, and one evening, when they had galloped round some

big fields, from which the last haycock had been drawn, as they reined up to a walk, Bryda pointed with her whip, and said :

"Do you notice those tall, grey gables among the trees in the hollow? They are all that remain of a once great place."

"Yes," assented Rhoda. "What is it called?"

"Its name, and the name of the family who owned it, are completely forgotten," said Niel. "It is just known as the ruin in the Kildangan town land; its history has been effaced, and rubbed off the face of the earth."

"Can we not inspect it closer?" she inquired.

"Only on foot. There are half a dozen big fences between us and it; but we might go over some Sunday afternoon, and have an inspection. Do you see the wonderful crop of oats in the same valley?"

"Yes, splendid; it might be the Field of the Cloth of Gold!"

"They take the same heavy harvest off it every year, and perhaps you will be shocked, when I tell you the reason. It was once a great burying-ground."

"Lost and unnamed, like the estate?"

"Yes, that's about it," he answered.

"I'm not surprised, for when Mrs. Donovan motored me about, this struck me as an empty, and deserted country."

"I suppose you mean the far side?" said Bryda, "where there's no hunting, and you can get a big

house with twenty bedrooms for twenty pounds a year,—with the gardens, and farm-buildings, thrown in."

"No, no; I mean the roads. Why are there so few people to be seen on them?"

"Because there are so few people to see!" replied Niel. "Steady emigration drains Ireland year after year. There's not enough employment to go round. Down in the south, we have few manufactures, and there's little or no amusement for the young people. I remember when there was dancing at the Cross on Sundays. They have done away with that now, as well as wakes."

"Niel," exclaimed his sister, "you don't mean to say you call a wake an amusement?"

"Well, then—an excitement. There's no variety at all, except a few 'select' dances. And you never see the boys and girls, what is called, 'walking out' together. It's no more the custom in Ireland, than among the natives of India. Of a Sunday, Miss Kyle, you may observe droves of young women sauntering along, talking and giggling; the men keeping altogether to themselves. There may be a good reason for this,—but the result must be infernally dull. Then sport is declining—especially with regard to small meetings. At the last Doonbeg fixture, only three horses were entered for two days' racing. I sent down Darling and Gorsoon, and a couple more, just post-entries, for very shame's sake—though none of them were fit. So with such a shortage of amusements,

perhaps you can understand, why this is called 'The Melancholy Isle.' "

"And, bad as it is, the men, as usual, have the best of it," added Bryda. "I asked a young woman lately, what they did with themselves on a holiday? And she replied: 'We go to Mass, and after that we just sit at home, and chat.' Now the men crowd to football matches, and play cards, and poach, but the poor girls must find it deadly. No wonder, they go off to Australia, and America."

"Such pretty girls too," said Rhoda, "with fathomless blue eyes, and masses of hair. I saw them when I was coming here, and got into the emigrant train by mistake."

"Yes, that was a remarkable adventure," exclaimed Niel. "I wonder you weren't carried out to New York. As for the nice-looking Irish girls—I can tell you this—that where *they* go, the boys will follow! And now shall we have one more gallop round the big field, before we face towards home?"

CHAPTER XVIII

THE Sunday following this ride in the fields, was a beautiful September day; an indescribable shimmer seemed to enfold the landscape; the leaves were lightly tipped with scarlet and orange, there was a hint of autumn in the air, and notwithstanding this, a sense of keen exhilaration. Soon after lunch Bryda suggested a walk.

"Pekoe has been whispering to me, that the poor dogs have not been outside the place for nearly a week, because we have been gardening or playing tennis; and they are agreed, that we are monsters of selfishness."

"All right," assented Niel. "Let's give 'em a day out! But it's my opinion, that these clever fellows often oblige us to exercise them, whether we like it or not. Shall we take Miss Kyle down to see the old ruins?"

"Yes, do," said Rhoda eagerly.

"It's not more than a mile and a half, but you will find some walls, and ditches to negotiate."

"Oh, they won't stand in my way! Where are Aunt Kathleen, and Doatie?"

"Madame is asleep in the hammock," replied Bryda. "And Doatie is just going to practise her last new songs."

"Then in that case, let's start at once," said her brother decisively.

Within five minutes' time, the three pedestrians were walking briskly down the avenue, their progress somewhat impeded by the dogs,—who, with short, hysterical barks, were scouring round and round them—their mode of expressing gratitude, and ecstasy.

"Freddy and Pekoe, bad boys," said Rhoda, "I am told you were both out rabbiting last evening."

"Yes, and they'll get caught in a trap some day," said Niel. "Hullo, hullo! I'm afraid *we* are in a trap! I see the Rahan motor looming over the hill. I know Lyddy has a house full, so I shall bolt in the very best rabbit form!"

"And of course I must go back," said Bryda resignedly; "they will want tea. It's Bridget's day out, and Bessie has toothache. But Rhoda, do you and Niel go on. You really cannot disappoint the dogs, and if these people don't stay late, I'll come and meet you."

"Capital!" agreed her brother. "Come along with me, Miss Kyle. We will dodge through the plantation, and sneak out through the back avenue." As he spoke, he opened the gate, and led the way across a paddock. "Stand *here*," he said, as they reached a clump of trees, "or we may be spotted as the car passes. We had better wait a few minutes."

"I don't think I have ever been in this field till now," said Rhoda, looking round the enclosure, —sheltered on all sides with noble elms. "How strangely quiet it is!"

"There is a reason for that," he answered, with a significant smile. "The place has a bad name. It's known as the Duelling Field."

"Do you mean—where men fought duels long ago?"

"Yes; and where, by all accounts, they fight still! —especially on a moonlight night."

"But of course you don't believe such nonsense," and Rhoda looked at him with a quizzical glance.

"I'm not so sure. If you are to credit Martin, he has seen strange things."

"What sort of things, *par exemple*?"

"*Par exemple*—a slim young gentleman in a ruffled shirt, and satin knee-breeches, his hair tied up with a ribbon bow, running away across the field, with a naked sword in his hand. And a number of people crowding round someone lying on the ground."

"Ahem!—what a tragic story!" she exclaimed.

"Yes, and he is not the only ghost-seer. Shouts, and the clashing of foils have been heard; sober people have positively declared they have witnessed duels, or encountered a number of men carrying a dead body."

"But you have never been so fortunate?"

"No. I've not the faculty of second sight, or seeing the supernatural. But I can tell you one thing that

has come under my own eyes : the condition of young horses after a night in this field. They are nervous, trembling, off their feed, covered with sweat, and look tucked up and out of condition for days afterwards. I believe it is generally agreed, that animals are conscious of objects, not visible to us."

"And what does all this amount to?" questioned the girl.

"That one of my best paddocks is almost useless. I take one crop of hay off it—and that is all. I can't use it for grazing. It is even avoided by Jane Berrigan's geese,—and no one will cross it after sundown."

"You should make those duellists pay a heavy rent. Ah, there goes the motor at last!"

"Yes, I expect it was delayed at the gate while Mary Martin was dressing, and taking out her curling pins."

"Do you know—I really think I ought to go in, and help Bryda. I'm sure Mrs. Donovan will expect to see me."

"Blessed are those that don't expect!" rejoined Niel. "At such a pinch, Doatie may lend a hand with the tea. I noticed men in the car.—Perhaps you would really prefer to return?" he halted and looked at her keenly. "If so,—don't let me detain you."

"No, indeed," she answered, colouring indignantly at the suggestion, "I was only thinking of Bryda—and we might see the ruins another time."

"No time like the present," he declared decisively.

"A put-off thing, rarely comes off. Perhaps next Sunday it may be wet—or one of us may be dead."

"What a nice, cheerful idea!"

"And to-day is glorious, so do come along," he urged. "If you play these poor fellows false," glancing at the trio who had sat down, and were surveying them with pained anxiety, "and throw them over in this dishonourable way, they will never trust you again!"

"Oh, very well then, I must keep in their good books. Let us start."

Without further delay the couple made their way across the back avenue, over a stile, and into a pasture,—where there were several young horses.

"This is my nursery," said Conroy, "and those are my precious long-tails—mostly two-year olds."

"How pretty and graceful they look," she remarked.

"Yes, there is some good blood among them. That dark bay colt over there, *ought* to make my fortune and win big races—but he's bound to come to grief in some way."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because I have no luck," he answered with emphasis. "Here we come to the old coach-road, and now your troubles begin in earnest!" To which announcement, his companion answered with a gay, incredulous laugh.

They crossed the coach-road, with its extravagant stretch of grass on either side, and climbed into a great wood; Conroy led the way, by an almost imperceptible footpath that wound in and out among

the trees. Occasionally he held back a branch, or warned his follower of a hole or a root; then suddenly the track turned a sharp corner, and after a further walk of about ten minutes, the great trees appeared to fall away on either side, and gave place to an outline of crumbling walls, venerable yews, brambles, nettles and laurels gone mad.

"This is the old avenue," announced the guide. "You'd scarcely recognize it for that, would you? It's rather bad going—so be careful."

Presently their path was blocked by a high wall of loose stones, a most formidable impediment. This Conroy climbed with practised ease, and then walked on, abandoning his companion to scramble over as best she might.

"They put these obstructions across, when the land was cut up and divided," he explained, when she joined him, a little breathless,—and not a little offended. "Here's another of them! I don't know whether you'd like me to help you?" and he looked at her in a hesitating way. "You see, I go by Bryda—who prefers to worry along alone."

"And I prefer to worry along alone too," replied Rhoda, waving him forward; but on this occasion, she caught her skirt on a loose stone, and with a crash brought down half the obstacle.

"Hullo, I say, I hope you're not hurt?" cried Conroy, hurrying back.

"No, no damage—only to the *wall*," Rhoda answered, as she picked herself up.

"That's all right. Well, now you will see the ruins in a couple of minutes."

After they had tramped and fought their way through a dense growth of weeds, and thistles, they came to a fine, lofty archway, entrance to a courtyard—only there was no court, merely heaps of stones and slates, and here and there a gable. The house itself was an empty shell, its heavy chimney-stacks still standing ; also the front wall and entrance, over which hung a weather-beaten coat-of-arms, almost entirely effaced. Passing through the doorway, the interior proved to be a mere roofless enclosure, which afforded grazing to a couple of goats,—who lifted their heads, and stared at the intruders with blank, milk-blue eyes.

"I believe this was a fine place once," said Conroy. "Over there, you see the remains of a chapel. To the left was a garden—it's marvellous how the wall has stood ! Inside, is just a jungle of dead fruit trees, smothered in brambles and rank leaves—the cover for every polecat in the country."

"And yet I suppose not more than a hundred years ago, people were living here ? " said Rhoda, as she stared about.

"Most likely ; but probably not the original owners. A house like this, goes by degrees ; first, the original family may have begun to feel the want of money, allowed it to become neglected, and drawn in their horns—perhaps they struggled on for a generation, and then disappeared. After them, it may have passed

to people of lesser degree, who liked the importance of occupying a notable place, but possibly were not able to maintain it. Then it began to go downhill—rooms were shut up—outhouses allowed to fall into ruin—the chapel was closed—no doubt there was a great auction, when the mansion was, so to speak, gutted; chimney-pieces and fixtures carried away, and sold for high prices in England and America. After the auction, came the small farmer, who stored potatoes and corn in the house, and let the garden go to seed. In a few years' time, the house had become dilapidated, rain poured through the roof, chimneys fell in; and even the farmer was forced to clear out. Since then, it has been deserted and abandoned. And there, Miss Kyle, I offer you the imaginary history of this nameless estate!"

"And I shouldn't be surprised, if there was a great deal of truth in your story," she answered with conviction.

"I'm afraid it's the history of many Irish places. Shall we sit down on the steps? You'll be glad of a rest after your struggle with the obstacles in the avenue, and if you don't mind—I'll have a pipe."

"You never smoke cigarettes, do you?" inquired Rhoda.

"Not often. To me, they are a woman's smoke, though I confess the Tommies fancy them; they are handier in uniform—'Wild Woodbine,' five a penny—that's about their form."

"How poisonous! A pipe is better than that."

"Yes; I don't know where I'd have been without mine, when I was six months in a block-house in South Africa."

"All alone?"

"Except for the men—about ten: *they* were all right. They had their cards and games and stories."

"Was it terribly lonely?"

"Oh, well, I got used to it, and it grew on me! When I went back to headquarters and the mess, changed my fare from tinned beef, and bread and jam, and mixed with my brother officers, I felt most awfully shy and miserable. Of course, I got over it in time; they say, that this is often the effect of being cut off, and living to one's self."

"You are not very sociable now, are you?" she asked, with a glimmer of mischief in her eyes. "You don't even favour us with your company at lunch."

"I don't care for lunch," he replied. "I generally 'do a miss.' As for society, Lismoyle is, so to speak, *my* block-house! I am defending it all I know against tremendously big odds, and I've no leisure for playing about, like Tom Bingham, and Pat FitzGerald, and all that lot; though I could enjoy a good time as well as the best, if I hadn't the place on my hands. I know I'm a bit of a wet blanket—but I must stick to my job."

"And you have lived this severe sort of life, ever since you came home," said Rhoda, "starting at cock-crow for cattle and horse fairs, running the farm,—never taking a holiday?"

"No, I can't afford holidays! I'd have liked to run over to the regimental dinner, but I have no London kit."

"No?" and she looked incredulous.

"Yes, it's a fact; you won't meet *me* strolling down Piccadilly with a slim waist, a tall hat well over my ears, patent leather boots, and a buttonhole."

As they sat on the steps, the dogs pressed round them sociably, and Pekoe attempted to climb into Rhoda's lap.

"Why are they not away hunting?" she said. "What a magnificent and wasted opportunity!"

"Yes, I rather wonder too," agreed Conroy, taking off his cap, and producing his pipe. "But people say there's something queer about these ruins. After dark, no one will come near them, no, not if you were to give them a hundred pounds!"

"But surely you do not believe that sort of nonsense, do you? You're not *really* superstitious?"

"Where is the Irishman that isn't, in his heart? I'm not superstitious in the ordinary way. I don't object to peacocks, or ladders, or Fridays. My feeling is something that I cannot define or explain—I'm awfully bad at explaining;—but, all the same, it's there."

"And so you believe you are unlucky?" said Rhoda.

"I'm sure of it! What have I got? Where is my luck?" and he turned, and looked at her gravely.

"You are luckier than I am in some ways," declared his companion. "My only near relation in the wide world is Aunt Kathleen." She paused for a moment.

"Now you, have a sister who is such a dear!—Thoughtful, unselfish, and good to everyone. You have robust health; whilst mine is considered shaky; and a beautiful old place for your very own."

"Yes. I cannot complain of my health," he admitted. "I'm as hard as a rock. I've never had a day's sickness, bar two bouts of fever. As for the sister—I don't know where I should be without her. The fine old place, is where the bad luck comes in! Sometimes I think, there's no use striving to keep things together. I feel like that fellow who was always shoving a stone uphill, and it promptly trundled down again. I may yet have to let the house and land; then it will come to this, and our very name, and the name of Lismoyle, will be wiped off the face of the earth."

As Conroy concluded this melancholy prophesy, he put down his pipe, and resting his head on his hands, stared out straight before him.

Here was an entirely new aspect of the usually silent and reserved Captain Conroy. Rhoda glanced at him, as he sat far gazing, and was struck by his attitude of hopeless dejection. Poor fellow! Undoubtedly the burden of Lismoyle was beyond his strength; and to think, that it was her own aunt, her nearest relative, who was chiefly responsible for the condition of affairs. Her aunt and cousin, who were at this moment living in his house, and practically living "on him," were *her* kindred—and no relation whatever to Niel. As these thoughts came crowding into her head, her cheeks

tingled, and she felt bitterly humiliated and ashamed. She was bound in honour to do something, to relieve the situation, to make full restitution—but how ?

Presently she said, in a would-be cheerful voice :

“ I’ve heard that the place has been wonderfully improved, and your horses are celebrated—so Mr. Bingham told me.”

“ Possibly,” assented her companion ; “ but celebrity did not prevent one of my most promising two-year-olds, from breaking his back, and having to be shot. He fetched precisely seven-and-sixpence at the kennels.”

“ I wish I could help in some way ! ”

“ You do,” he answered, recovering his everyday manner. “ You are our lady-help : you give a hand to Bryda,—who is a regular maid-of-all-work ; you keep Dorothea in check, you cheer up the whole house—dogs and all.” As he spoke, he pulled Pekoe’s tail.

“ Bryda is a wonderful manager,” she said, “ so thorough, and so clever.”

“ Yes, she is, and it’s partly her English training. But it’s not the house that runs away with the coin ; we live in a very modest way, as you know ; and even the stables would not break me. It’s the old bills that keep cropping up. Thank goodness, I’m getting to the end of these ; but there are the mortgages ! ”

“ Ah ! ” exclaimed Rhoda expressively.

“ Yes, you may well say ‘ Ah ! ’ ” and his set mouth trembled a little. “ When I came home two years ago, there was nothing on the land but a flock of geese, and an old donkey, that drew my father’s

bathchair. The roof was leaking, and everything seemed to have gone to pieces. When the estate was sold under the Land Act, more than half the money went to pay off debts, and there is a heavy charge on the property." (He was too chivalrous to name her aunt's jointure.) "So I was advised to raise another mortgage. It was that—or quit! And it's these mortgages that are choking me. Look here," he broke off suddenly, "I'm deadly ashamed to bother you like this, with all my worries. I can't think what possessed me! Perhaps this place has given me the blue-devils!" and the ghost of a smile crossed his face.

"I think it is most awfully good of you, to take me into your confidence," replied Rhoda, "and I honestly believe, that anyone who works as hard as you do, *must* pull through."

"Yes," he said. "If the fellow that has the mortgages (and I believe they are all in one hand) will only give me time. Anyway, I pay the interest to the hour."

"But why should he not give you time?" argued Rhoda. "Possibly, if your young horses turn out well, you may be able to redeem the mortgages, sooner than you think?"

"Unfortunately my young horses go wrong or die. I was reckoning to get five hundred for the thorough-bred who broke his back, and I hoped that would make a beginning, in the direction of paying off the principal."

"Are the mortgages for a very large sum?"

"Between eight and nine thousand pounds will clear me."

"That doesn't seem so very much!" said the girl unguardedly.

"Not *much*!" he repeated, staring at her in amazement. "Perhaps you and I, have different ideas of money; but to me, it is an unattainable fortune."

"I suppose—you couldn't borrow?"

"Borrow? No," and he laughed. "I neither could, nor would. Well, now, Miss Kyle, you know everything. I say, may I call you Rhoda? It sounds rather rot, being Captain Conroy and Miss Kyle, when after all we are sort of connections."

"Certainly you may call me Rhoda," she answered, with a blush and a laugh. "I always call you Niel behind your back."

"That's nice of you! Sometimes a fellow feels, he has to open his mind to another soul; and this bit of a talk with you, has done me a lot of good. I know you have a clear head, and can sympathize with poverty. Of course, I've not said a word to Bryda. She has troubles enough of her own. I don't want to add to them, and naturally my monetary anxieties, can have no meaning for *you*."

"You are mistaken," protested Rhoda impulsively; "they mean a great deal. I understand all about them,—and am sincerely sorry for you."

"Thank you; that's something to the good." (He had long realized that there was a latent power of sympathy in his companion.) "And if now and then, I am silent and surly, you will forgive me, and know, that I am thinking of money—and mortgages."

"Yes, I will, of course," she answered eagerly.

"Give me your hand on that," he said.

She promptly consented, and as her hand lay within his, his grasp tightened to a grip that was almost painful in its force.—Then suddenly releasing her numbed fingers, he said, in a would-be cheerful tone:

"That's a bargain—let us talk of something else?"

"Yes," she agreed, rising. "We must talk of going home."

"Must we? All right," he replied, looking at his watch, then without another word, he picked up his cap, and led the way back through the courtyard, accompanied by the hitherto depressed, but now exuberant dogs.

There was little conversation between Rhoda and her escort, as they fought their way over walls, and through roots, and weeds. Now and then Conroy would draw his companion's attention to a curious tree, or shrub, a red squirrel, a covey of partridges, or to the amazing glints, and shades, that were bathing the hazy blue hills in rose-colour, and changing their tints to Imperial purple. At last, just as they arrived at the wood overlooking the coach-road,—a motor flew by.

"It's the Rahan people—how late they have stayed!" exclaimed Rhoda.

Niel was sensible of a feeling of relief, that they had not been observed and hailed; for although he had every right to walk with any one he pleased—including

Miss Kyle, his guest—yet he did not desire to encounter Lyddy Donovan's bludgeoning banter.

Mrs. Donovan (with a woman friend, and two officers) had lingered on and on at Lismoyle, awaiting with feverish impatience, the arrival of Niel and Miss Kyle. She had been assured by Madame Conroy, that "they were somewhere about the place with the dogs, and would be in at any moment," but an hour passed, and yet there was no sign of them. Madame and Doatie and the two officers were amusing themselves, and Doatie was at her noisiest; on the other hand, Mrs. Donovan's lady friend had noted that Lyddy had become surprisingly silent; her restless eyes continually wandered to the door. At last, when a little French clock chimed six, she stood up, and gave the signal for departure. As she took leave of Madame, it struck that lady, that Lyddy looked glum and morose, and for some mysterious reason, was in one of her nasty tempers!

Mrs. Donovan, when Miss Kelly, had been brought up in "a back block" in Australia, and the bush had endowed her with a remarkable sense of sight, and hearing. Something caught her attention, as they flew by the wood; a glimpse of a dog—yes. She was driving the car, and slowed down as they neared a corner: turning her head, and looking back, she beheld three dogs of her acquaintance drop into the road one after another; she also caught sight of the outline of two people moving among the trees—they were Niel Conroy, and the English girl.

CHAPTER XIX

WHEN Mrs. Donovan saw the Lismoyle dogs dash across the road, and realized that they were followed by Niel, and Miss Kyle, a sudden maddening thought flashed through her brain: the blood seemed to thunder in her ears, as she drove the car at the reckless speed of forty miles an hour (fortunately the roads were empty), and dashed round corners, without a single hoot! Naturally at such a pace, it was not many minutes before she found herself at her own door; here, she took scant notice of her guests, and preceding them up the steps, muttering indistinctly about "a frightful headache," hurried to her room, and locked herself in; then, in a flushed and breathless condition, she sat down, and confronted herself in the looking-glass. Somehow her own face always helped her! It was company, and in periods of mental stress (these were few and far between), it was to her reflection that she turned for consolation, and sympathy. At the moment, how hot and distorted, that same reflection looked! —twitching and quivering, with repressed emotion.

And no wonder, since this was the first time she had ever dreamt of there being anything between Niel, and the English girl! Could it be possible, that he had seen the Rahan car coming, and—horrible idea!—had purposely made his escape? Was Niel—*her* Niel—attracted by this skinny young woman, whom she herself, had urged, commanded, and persuaded, to remain on at Lismoyle? Why had she been so mad?—what folly had possessed her? Then she cast her thoughts back—Lydia Donovan was a woman who was always plain-spoken, and honest with herself. Yes, she had barred the girl's escape, partly because she enjoyed her company;—Miss Kyle was a novelty, and brought a whiff of London into the dull atmosphere of a country neighbourhood; a good musician, and played bridge. Also she was amusing, and she was plain. Plain—that is to say, when she had first arrived—but not now. Two months of soft Irish air, had given her a complexion. Many people—of whom she was not one—thought her very pretty; and there was yet another, and meaner reason for her opposition to the girl's departure. Next season in London, she hoped by the help of Miss Kyle, and her wealthy aunt, to clamber into a comfortable position, in what is known, as “smart society.”

It must be confessed, that Lydia Donovan dearly loved a title, and longed to associate with fashionable, well-dressed, exclusive people—such as those she had noticed in company with Rhoda Kyle. Well, now

she must keep a restraint on herself, and watch ; and if her suspicions were justified, would put a fine big spoke in the young woman's wheel ! Of course, there might be nothing in it, and she must look at the situation with everyday common sense—Niel always eluded teas, and visitors, and it was well known that he barred girls ; how in the world, could he escape from one, who, thanks to her own persuasion, was actually living under the same roof ? But there was no necessity for him to take her for a long walk,—and why was Bryda left behind ? Perhaps she was making a mountain out of a mole-hill ; she must try and look at things calmly,—for it would never, never do, to show her hand !

Mrs. Donovan reappeared in the drawing-room before dinner, splendidly clothed, and entirely in her right mind. In answer to sympathetic inquiries, she assured her friends, that her headache had been completely cured by phenacetin, and forty winks.—But a woman pal, who was generally in her confidence, noticed two spots of vivid colour burning high on her cheeks. Something had upset Lyddy ! She had gone forth that afternoon in the highest spirits, and returned, looking intensely excited, and at the same time as black as thunder. Could it be that she heard something to upset her at Lismoyle ? And was there really anything in the whisper, that she was crazy about that good-looking Captain Conroy—who was now no more, and no less, than a gentleman horse-dealer—with a property mortgaged to the

chimneys? Well, if Lyddy was determined to make a fool of herself, it would be a splendid thing for the young man!—

It was some time before Mrs. Donovan found herself alone with Niel Conroy, and in her own resolute but bantering fashion, she questioned him as to his absence on that Sunday afternoon? Without an atom of self-consciousness, or embarrassment, he answered carelessly:

"Oh, yes, I remember; we had settled to go and see those old ruins, when we heard a motor on the road; Bryda turned back, as she knew there would be visitors, but Miss Kyle and I, went on. You see, the dogs had not been out of the place for days, and we didn't like to disappoint them!"

"So you'd rather disappoint *me*, than the dogs?" she exclaimed, her face on fire, her eyes flashing.

"No, my dear Lyddy; but yours is not the only motor in the country."

"That's true," she answered, instantly appeased—"they're in dozens now! People have them, that you think could hardly keep a wheelbarrow. Peter Brander, the rich man, that's come to Marshlands, has a huge forty-five horse-power Napier. And did you go on to the ruins after all?"

"Yes; it's rather a scrambling excursion."

"And so you showed Miss Kyle what an impoverished estate can come to?"

"I did. She had never seen such a place in all her born days."

"No, how could she, when her outlook is a London street? I suppose she was horrified?"

"Yes, I think she was—surprised, and sorry."

"*She's* not the sort of girl that would have any use for a Castle rack-rent, where everything is on short commons—except the rats; and for that matter, the girl herself is as poor as a church mouse," and Mrs. Donovan gave a loud victorious laugh. "*She'd* never do for a poor man's wife, would she, eh, Niel?"

"You're quite right, Lyddy—she would not."

This little talk, had set the widow's mind happily at ease. Niel was hers—although anything in the shape of love-making was negative, as far as he was concerned; but then he was naturally such a reserved, and undemonstrative sort of fellow.

According to Thackeray, "a woman, provided she has not a hump, can marry any man she pleases," and Lydia Donovan subscribed most heartily to his opinion. She was infatuated about Niel Conroy, with the ripe folly of forty-six; such crazes are not altogether uncommon. A woman has been known to fall violently in love with a man many years her junior; sometimes this love has been warmly reciprocated, and the couple have been extremely happy. But, putting love and affection on one side, the relict of Michael Donovan was determined to raise herself in the county! It was a well-known fact, that Michael's people had been of the peasant class; indeed, it was whispered that his father, and

Big Jane's grandmother, were brother and sister.—This was a truly terrible whisper.

Wealth alone, even when accompanied by lavish hospitality, cannot accomplish everything. The Boyles of Brynn, the Mahons of Cahirmahon, the Gores of Gores Bridge, had never called. Mrs. Donovan knew them to speak to in the hunting field, and subscribed handsomely to their charities; they were always overwhelmingly polite, but never had their cards been laid upon her hall table. Well, when she was Madame Conroy, they would be compelled to visit her, and it would be her good pleasure, to take precedence of them in society. Lady Dundalk and her ugly daughter would not acknowledge her—no, not even at bazaars! and looked down their noses when they passed her in the street. However, once she was Madame Conroy, all these unpleasant memories, would be extinguished, and forgotten!

* * * * *

It was now the end of October; Rhoda had been established for nearly three months at Lismoyle, and felt as if she had lived there for years. Her aunt, Mrs. Kyle—now many thousand miles away—wrote her long and glowing descriptions of Ceylon and Burma; her many friends at home sent her accounts of new fashions, new plays, and enticing invitations to visit them. One of these letters (which was warmly supported by Mrs. Kyle) urged that three months in the wilds of Ireland, was ample experience for any

English girl, and held out private theatricals, and three balls, as a bait, to lure the popular heiress to spend December in the Midlands. Nevertheless, the heiress was not to be tempted! The London and county society rush of gaieties, seemed somehow to belong to another life; she was startled to find herself so little interested in racing news, brilliant new plays, and Russian dancers; but on the contrary, in Mrs. Blake's promising Persian kittens, Coneen's baby brother, and Mary Martin's new dress. She was sensible of much deeper affection for Bryda, than her old friend Dolly Darcy,—who sent her pages of complaints, and half confessions—with “private” and “burn this” deeply under-scored—and who was undoubtedly getting herself into boiling water—thanks to the insidious attractions of a foreign prince. For her part, Rhoda dispatched forcible admonitions to her flighty friend, and even sent an urgent telegram. In reply to this, came Dolly's appeal: “*Why can't you come over to me? What is keeping you in Ireland?*” The answer to the first question was, that much as she liked Dolly, she dared not in her aunt's absence,—become entangled in her affairs. As to the second question—what was keeping her in Ireland?—an answer was more difficult. Was it her aunt, who was responsible for her long visit? Was it Bryda? No. Why not be honest, and confess the truth to herself? She stood in the window of her room with Dolly's letter in her hand, staring straight before her—but seeing nothing of the outward scene; she was looking

into her own heart. There she beheld the truth : and the truth was confounding ; there, something new had been awakened ; something of which she had not dreamed ; discarding all pretence, and self-deception, she told herself, that she, Rhoda Kyle, had bestowed her affection, unsought for, and unasked, on a man who had never given her a serious thought ! And yet, how much, and how often, she thought of *him* ! What could she do to arrest this strange infatuation ? Common-sense whispered, " there is an easy remedy—you must leave Lismoyle." But this alternative she met with a negative. Did not absence make the heart grow fonder ? But perhaps there was no truth in that old saying—perhaps, in a few months' time she would have forgotten Ireland, Lismoyle, and Niel Conroy ! (To this, an inward voice uttered an emphatic no.) There was little doubt, that in less than that period, he would have forgotten *her* ! He was always polite and attentive,—as to his sister's friend, and a guest—but no more ; like the old farmer and the claret, they never seemed to get any " forrader." Indeed, sometimes he appeared to have almost overlooked her existence. That talk, and his outburst among the ruins, had been merely a sudden impulse to relieve an over-burthened mind ; Niel would probably have said as much to Mitty Moore—had she happened to be his companion ; and if he were so inclined, he dared not allow himself to fall in love with her—believing her to be a penniless dependent ; and yet on the other hand, he held back from

taking a rich wife—even to redeem his beloved Lismoyle.

In spite of Niel's civil indifference, she was determined to help him, with all her might, and main. At present, her efforts were in the same category as those of the mouse, and the lion; but later, when she came of age, secretly and indirectly, she would retrieve the estate; she felt herself in honour bound, to restore, what her nearest of kin had so recklessly dispersed. Meanwhile, how hard and incessantly Niel worked! It seemed to her, that his labour was wasted like water running into sand; for what could a man in his position accomplish without capital, and figuratively strangled by mortgages, and debts? Surely he must know this? And yet his exertions never relaxed. With a sort of dogged courage, he broke and exercised horses, attended fairs and sales, where he bought and sold cattle;—besides serving on the Bench, and doing those various odd jobs, that fall to the lot of the active, and willing, gentleman-of-all-work. The consequence of this was, that his home rarely saw him during the day. Of an evening, after dinner, when there were no letters or accounts to claim his time, he would join the family in the drawing-room, ask Madame, or herself, for a song; or play a rubber of bridge; but as far as she was personally concerned, their acquaintance never advanced one inch, and his habitual reserve, was an obstacle to easy intercourse.—On the other hand, he was being constantly summoned to Rahan on various transparent excuses: with regard to

sick horses, or the purchase of hunters, or even to sympathize over the lamented death of a young prize heifer! These visits made Rhoda miserably jealous—yes, *jealous*! What was the use of deceiving herself, and calling the poignant sensation, by another name?

Would Niel marry Mrs. Donovan, in spite of Bryda's emphatic opinion to the contrary? Probably her own fortune was larger than Lyddy's; nevertheless, she must not speak of it: for not only was there her foolish promise to Aunt Char, but she would be confronted with her duplicity, in the manner in which she had evaded the truth, by every possible subterfuge. The Conroys believed her to be a poor relation—entirely dependent on the whims of a wealthy guardian;—she had allowed this falsehood to be believed; and when it was divulged, that, in spite of her pretence, and her mental reservation, she was really a very rich young woman—what then? As far as Niel and his sister were concerned, she was convinced, that she would be condemned, and cast forth from their hearth, like the traditional viper: for they were both so outspoken and truthful, that they would fail to understand the subtle shades of dissimulation. Bryda would disown her—Bryda, who was one in a thousand, so generous, and unselfish! How she slaved to help her brother—selling eggs and plants and grapes; and yet sparing some of her precious time to the sewing club, and going among the poor (who loved her for being her mother's daughter), giving them eggs, tea, milk, kind words, and even a

little money; whilst Madame merely offered them a light-hearted jest, and emphatically protested, that she was "a beggar herself!"

"Well I know you, and all your beggar-man tricks," she declared, declaiming from the doorstep to an old fellow, whose dusty shoes testified to a long, hot tramp. "You have good clothes hidden in some ditch, and come up here in rags to excite our compassion. I believe you stole this kit off our own scarecrow—I'm sure I recognize the coat; it was one the Captain had last year."

"Then if you do, it's one he give me himself," retorted the wearer. "And, indeed, he goes short, and shabby enough, as all the world can see."

Madame laughed, and her laugh stung the old man, who replied:

"Anyhow, he is good to an old soldier! Not one comes by here but gets a bite, and maybe a smoke. Sure, wasn't I in the Indies the same as himself, and when he sees me, he gives me the kind word, and maybe a couple of shillings. God grant him long life, and a rich wife!"

"And then, maybe, he'll give you *fifty* shillings! There's sense in your wish," declared Madame.

"See now," leaning on his stick, and glaring at her under his shaggy brows, "I remember this place when first you come here, and that's twenty year ago. An' I remember it since; an' I see it now," with a sweep of his stick. "You may call me a beggar, and it's mortal true—but I never ran through a family

estate—father and son—and ate up all I could lay hands on, and left them steeped in debt, and ruin.”

“I don’t know what on earth you are talking about!” screamed Madame from the top of the steps, and waving her delicate hands.

“Faix, that’s no matter, when all the country knows. It was cruel hard for Mr. Niel and his sister, when you laid yourself out to snare the old man; and now you are sucking the life out of the son!”

“You’re drunk,” screamed Madame, white with fury. “Martin! Martin! Where are you, Martin? Come and turn this old rascal out of the place!” and she ran into the house.

The veteran had addressed an audience consisting of Dan the gardener, Coneen of the streaky face, Doatie, and Rhoda. The latter was stricken with confusion, and shame: for the old soldier’s indictment was founded upon fact; this no doubt was the fashion in which the country people discussed her aunt among themselves. She hurried towards the laurel tunnel, in order to hide her blushes and embarrassment; but Doatie, on the contrary, stood her ground courageously, and shrieked threats, and abuse after the truth-teller,—till a bend in the avenue hid him from her sight.

Meanwhile Rhoda walked slowly round the garden, cooling her face, and endeavouring to regain her everyday composure. As she was making her third circuit, she beheld Bryda approaching with a somewhat weary air.

"I thought you would be here this fine, warm afternoon," she called out. "Isn't it wonderful how the roses are holding on?"

Rhoda nodded assent, and as Bryda took her arm, she continued: "I've had a busy time this afternoon, —sending off three pair of fowl, and six egg-boxes. Eggs are getting as rare as diamonds, so I'm going to raise my prices—and——"

"Bryda," interrupted her friend, "I want to ask you rather a strange question."

"Yes, what is it? Why are you looking so—so funny? At any rate, ask away."

"Very well. Then tell me—why does Niel allow Aunt Kathleen to make a home here? She has her jointure, and could live elsewhere."

"That is true," assented Bryda. "And Madame is at liberty to leave if she pleases; but it has always been an unwritten family law, that the Madame of the day, is welcome to make her headquarters at Lismoyle. And Niel, as you know, is a tremendous stickler for keeping things as they used to be,—so there's no more to be said! Matters must remain as they are, till one of them marries, and that won't be Niel—anyway, for years."

"Then you don't think——" began Rhoda, and she paused expressively.

"Oh, if you mean Lyddy, I say '*Never!*'"

"But supposing Niel were to come across a middling nice girl, and one you liked,—with a large fortune?" and Rhoda halted on the gravel walk and

confronted her friend with a heightened colour, and eyes of timid inquiry.

"Well then, my dear, since you ask me, all I can say is—that 'pigs might fly.'"

"But——" persisted the other.

"'But me no buts,' " quoted Bryda, seizing her by the arm. "Come along into the greenhouse, and hold the ladder, while I cut a couple of bunches of grapes for dinner."

CHAPTER XX

IT was now the middle of November ; the hunting season was in full swing, and created an entirely new set of conditions ; horses and their riders, runs, mishaps, and sporting gossip, swallowed up every other interest. Rhoda rode to the meets with Niel and Bryda—who “ followed,” and were generally in the first flight ; but she, being a mere beginner, confined herself to the ruck along the road ; to lanes, gates, gaps, and short cuts. Nevertheless, she had a surprising amount of diversion, and now and then ventured to “ throw a lepp.” Occasionally one of the Moores took her under her capable wing, and between her and Gabby, there existed a cheerful, hunting-field intimacy. The Moores, always well-mounted, were undeniable “ thrusters” ; it was only when one of the sisters had had a bad start, or met with some untoward adventure, that Rhoda saw anything of them, and she rarely encountered Niel Conroy,—who frequently acted as field-master. Among others, who were out, were Mrs. Donovan (with two horses), Pedro Brander, the Argentine millionaire, Tom

Bingham, riding a long-tailed thoroughbred, the parson and his wife, riding bicycles, and numbers of officers from the nearest garrison—and even Cork. Besides these, the usual road contingent, who knew every gap and gate and went remarkably straight—over the mahogany after dinner. In short, the whole so-called “side of the country,” whether on horse-back or in motor-cars, were assembled, and all more or less keen.

Among the few exceptions, were Madame and her daughter; hunting did not appeal to them, nor even driving to the meets, following along the roads, hailing their friends, and shouting conversation. “Tom,” the house horse, had been hunted, and seemed to consider that his proper place was in the run, and not between shafts; after one or two bad frights, and the notable occasion on which Tom had jumped the fence—tub and all—Madame and Doatie gave up pursuing, and as hunting, was the chief topic, and interest of the winter season, these butterflies found it desperately dull.

Doatie envied her cousin Rhoda, when she returned of an evening in extremely high spirits, with a brilliant colour, and somewhat tumbled hair,—eloquent of the incidents of the day. The eagerness and enthusiasm with which the followers described runs, disasters, and triumphs, excluded the stay-at-homes from many exciting conversations. Naturally, it was a matter of complete indifference to them, that Gabby Moore had taken Burke’s brook in a fly, or that Lydia

Donovan had lamed her best hunter, though it *did* interest them in a faint degree to hear, that the millionaire had bought a weight-carrier from Niel, and given him a cheque for two hundred and fifty pounds ! Unhappy ladies ! this was their dull season, and their only alleviation was local bridge parties—at which the female sex predominated, as ten to one.

One evening, which happened to be a non-hunting day,—as there was a black frost,—Madame and Doatie, who had been at a bridge party, returned unusually late. It was half-past seven, and dinner was waiting, when Madame entered the drawing-room in a sort of breathless haste. Tearing off her gloves, she abruptly inquired :

“ What’s for dinner ? ”

“ For dinner ? ” repeated Bryda. “ Let me think. Hare soup, Irish stew, and a pheasant. Why ? ”

“ Because six people will be here to dine in about a quarter of an hour.”

Bryda rose to her feet ; for once her colour had fled.

“ Yes, I met them at the bridge party at Rocklands—Colonel and Mrs. Ball, Mrs. Ball’s sister, Mr. Fordyce, an M.P., Captain Carden, and Mr. Brander. He was taking them all back to Cork in his big motor, but it is such a desperately cold, dark night, that I implored them to come and dine, and said we would find them beds of *sorts*. It will be rather fun, and I know, Niel,” glancing at her step-son, “you always like to come across soldier-men. Well, now I must run and dress,” and without another word, she was gone. !

Niel and his sister stared at one another in expressive silence ; his eyes looked dark, he was evidently struggling with acute exasperation. At last he said :

" I say, I've a good mind to go to the avenue gate, and stop them. Let them go to the hotel at Kilbeggan ! "

" No, no, Niel, you can't. We must manage somehow ! " she remonstrated. " This is not the first time, we have been taken aback. I know there's another pheasant, and we'll have an omelette, and there are plenty of pears and grapes ; but dinner won't be till half-past eight. Do you go down to the cellar, and get out some wine."

" But where are they all to sleep ? " he asked helplessly.

" Some of us must turn out ; and Niel, you might warn Martin. Tell him to light more lamps, and see that there's a good fire in the dining-room. Come along, Rhoda, and help."

There was no time for discussion, it must be action—immediate and strenuous action ! Doatie had not appeared, but crept upstairs to dress. She never associated herself with her mother's domestic surprises, and left all the trouble and bother to other people ; subsequently entering the drawing-room as collected and detached, as any guest !

While Madame and her daughter were hastily making their toilettes, Bryda was assisting in the kitchen ; Martin was getting out the silver ; Rhoda was arranging the dinner-table with old branch

candlesticks, and chrysanthemums. She enjoyed the rush and scramble—it somehow recalled private theatricals! Flying round the table with a handful of forks and spoons, she introduced herself to Niel as “the new parlourmaid,” when he entered laden with cobwebby bottles. Fortunately there were still some remains, of a once notable cellar.

The guests arrived but too promptly, and were received in the drawing-room by Madame in evening dress, full of vivacious welcomes, and apologies. Conroy’s room, and Bryda’s,—in which fires had been lighted,—were made over to the strangers, and at half-past eight o’clock the gong sounded for dinner. It proved to be a wonderful impromptu meal; only in Ireland or India, could it have been served at such short notice, and in such superior style.—Possibly the strangers supposed it to be the usual family repast!

These guests were, first of all, Pedro Brander, a big, dark, handsome man, whose hair was just turning grey on the temples. His black locks and flashing black eyes he inherited from a Spanish grandmother. With these flashing Spanish eyes, he had a soft Irish brogue, and a delightfully genial, and impulsive manner. Pedro Brander was a pioneer, who had made his fortune by sheer hard work, self-denial, and an invincible determination to succeed. Now he was a big personality in every sense, a ranche owner on an immense scale, and had come home to spend a winter in the Old Country, and among his own people.

Colonel Ball a smart, alert-looking officer,

commanded the regiment at present stationed in Cork. His wife, a pretty, animated young woman, was extraordinarily keen on bridge, and hunting. Her sister, Miss Wargrave, was ditto, ditto, and Captain Carden,—who had recently passed through the Staff College,—was said to be “after” Miss Wargrave.

The sixth guest was Mr. Fordyce, K.C. and M.P., Colonel Ball’s cousin, a brilliantly clever barrister of fifty, who went about the world with his eyes wide open, and was now making his first inspection of Ireland.

In spite of the preliminary haste, and confusion, everything went off smoothly; the dinner was well served, and admirably cooked,—for the honour of the family,—the wine unexceptionable; beautiful old Irish silver attracted much admiration, and was declared to be only surpassed, by the treasures in Trinity College! Talk was incessant; hunting, bridge, and good stories, kept the ball rolling. Madame, as entertainer and hostess, was in her element. She chattered incessantly, and looked wonderfully attractive in Doatie’s diamond bandeau, and Rhoda’s pearls—in short, a very “taking” lady.

“People talked of the poverty of the Irish landlords, but it was the usual bunkum,” said Mr. Fordyce to himself, as his small, quick eyes took in the silver, the hothouse fruit, the beautiful hostess, wearing a thousand-pound pearl necklace, and the handsome, well-bred host. “And then, by Jove, the fine old furniture, and the pictures!”

Mr. Horace Fordyce was something of a judge of both, and had frequently dropped in at Christie's, and other sales. He happened to be seated next to Rhoda (who was a little fatigued by her recent exertions), and proceeded to submit her to an agreeable cross-examination.

"You are not a native?" he said, as he helped himself to pepper.

"No," she replied. "A mere Londoner, like yourself," and they surveyed one another, with cool polite eyes.

"But related to the family?"

"Yes, Madame Conroy is my aunt."

"Do you like Ireland, Miss Kyle?"

"Immensely!"

"Been here long?"

"About three months."

"Oh, then you really *do* like it, my dear young lady. It is not a mere *façon de parler*?"

She nodded.

"I have no doubt, you have had some amusing experiences, and will impart them to *me*?" looking at her with his head a little on one side, and an insinuating smile.—But Rhoda merely returned his smile.

"We hear so much about poverty-stricken Irish landowners; but this," with a wave of his forensic hand, "entirely refutes such foolish tales."

"I don't think it should," she protested. "Captain Conroy is quite poor."

"Ah, yes; but there are different grades of poverty.

Poor people don't keep expensive cooks, fine cellars, magnificent silver, and valuable pictures."

Rhoda hesitated ; should she tell her neighbour that Bryda had made the sauces, the soufflé and the savoury ? That she had assisted to lay the table, and had polished up the branch candlesticks with her own hands ? No ; instead she remarked :

" I never heard that these pictures were valuable."

" Then allow me to present you with a fact ! Do you see the stout old gentleman in uniform with white breeches ? I suspect him to be a Romney."

" No, no, he is only a copy. The original has been sold."

" Well, it strikes me as genuine. Just look at the decisive drawing,—the superb colouring. Badly hung, I grant you !"

Captain Carden, who was on Rhoda's left hand, and had been listening to the conversation with eager interest, now leaned forward and said :

" I think Miss Kyle is right. Unless I'm mistaken, I've seen the original in a sales-room, where it fetched an enormous price. I am a great admirer of Romney ; and to think, that people now give thousands and thousands for his pictures, and the most that the poor fellow ever received, was one hundred and twenty pounds ! I remember hearing at the time, that this stout old soldier was one of a pair ; the other was his wife—but her portrait has never been traced."

" Apparently she ran away from him !" said Mr.

Fordyce facetiously. "By the way, I hope all these valuables are heavily insured?"

"No, I don't think anything in the house is insured," replied Rhoda.

"What stark madness!" he exclaimed. "I shall remonstrate with Captain Conroy, even at the risk of seeming a beastly nuisance."

Here Mr. Fordyce's remarks were interrupted by the presentation of a delicious savoury. As soon as he had disposed of this, he looked towards the foot of the table, and addressed himself to his host.

"I say, Captain Conroy," he began, "I should like to know your opinion about the present state of the country. What is the attitude of the people in these parts?"

His host, surprised by his abrupt question, surveyed him gravely, and replied:

"Peaceable and poverty-stricken; most of the gentry—stone broke!"

"Oh, I take it that Irish sentiment governs the whole question—the question of the Boyne, and the Shannon?"

"You can take anything you like," replied Conroy, with a laugh, "only leave us the spoons!"

"Ah, I see you are non-committal, eh? But I'm out for information—information at the fountain's head. How do the old-age pensions work?"

"First rate."

"Ah!" and Mr. Fordyce drew a long breath of satisfaction.

"Yes, the old people with five shillings a week get more respect—I won't say care. Two in one house bring in ten shillings every Friday. Money in the hand is scarce, and very welcome. I hope you won't be disappointed in your visit to this country."

"No, no. So far, I have been delighted, and illuminated. With such fine natural scenery, I wonder that Ireland isn't overrun with tourists. A score or two of smart Swiss hotel-keepers, would work the trick; and the people, besides being, I may say, affectionately courteous, have such an original way of 'putting things.' To-day, for instance, a man assured me, that he never had any 'resource to tobacco.'—I must confess I'm sorry for him!—and almost at the same time, a woman informed me, that her son had been 'murdered by a bicycle.' Hullo!"—pausing—"what's this? Madame, and a ghost story! Let us all listen."

"Sure now, it was only for Colonel Ball!" she protested in her soft, drawling brogue, "and every one of you have stopped talking! How in the world am I to go on? You make me feel as nervous, as if I had to make a speech."

"And I bet you'd make a rattling good one," declared Brander, with a little foreign bow. He was completely fascinated by this beautiful, vivacious woman; what a housekeeper, and hostess!

"I implore you not to deprive us of your tale," urged Mr. Fordyce, leaning forward and speaking with *empressement*. "Pray what has Ball done, that he should have it all to himself?"

"Well, it's only a little, little story, not worth your attention, but such as it is, you shall hear it," and Madame cast a smiling glance round the table, and then began :

"You must know, that my family are from the West, and like others have a death warning. With some, it is a coach and four black horses, with the Conroys a huge dog ; but ours is ten times more shocking—it takes the shape of a black coffin standing on end ! I only saw it once," and she gave a little dramatic shudder. "It was a bright summer night. The shutters were not closed, and my room was nearly as light as day. I was suddenly awoke by hearing something moving, and creaking about on the landing. I thought it was a servant, but presently the handle turned ; very slowly and stealthily the door opened, and a tall black form, exactly like a coffin, shuffled in, and stood upright beside the bed ! I screamed, and covered up my head under the bed-clothes, where I remained until I was nearly smothered. At last I ventured to peep out. The shape was still there—oh, so tall and black, and horrible—I declare I felt my hair crisping up on my head ! At last the thing scraped and shuffled out of the room, and I distinctly heard it go clumping and creaking down-stairs ; then I jumped up, and locked the door. Very early the next morning, someone came and hammered on it, to tell me that my father had died suddenly in the night."

"Thank you, Madame," said Mr. Fordyce, gently

clapping his hands. "With your permission I shall elaborate your experience for a Christmas number—unless you want to make use of it as copy yourself?"

"Oh, take it and welcome!" was her generous reply. "I couldn't string a tale together, not to save my life!"

After dinner, Madame herded the ladies into the spacious Adams drawing-room, where they found softly-shaded lights, a fine wood fire, and two bridge tables. As soon as the men had made their appearance, she sat down at the piano,—and acutely aware of the charm she was exercising—sang in her usual delightful style, while Pedro Brander, with his heart in his eyes, hung over the instrument entranced. After a Creole love-song,—which was rapturously encored, the company set about the serious business of the evening, and Rhoda and Bryda escaped in order to help to prepare the bedrooms, and make anxious arrangements for to-morrow's breakfast. It was past one o'clock in the morning, when loud laughter and talking in the hall, and on the staircase, announced that the guests were dispersing for the night.

"I say, I hope we haven't put you out?" said Brander to his host, "but Madame insisted upon our invading you, and taking pot-luck. I don't know what her idea of pot-luck may be,—but she has given us a ripping good dinner."

Then Niel told a huge lie, and replied :

"Oh, of course it's all right. I'm only too pleased to see you."

"What a fine old house it is!" continued Brander, looking round, candle-stick in hand; "real mahogany doors, eh? When I first went out on a ranche, *my* only door, was a mare's hide! Well, I think I'll be off to roost," and he toiled heavily upstairs, and so to bed.

As for his host, he slept on the drawing-room sofa, and the two girls in a long disused bedroom, where the rats in the wall, were evidently carrying on a vigorous campaign.

The guests left at an early hour the next morning, sped by Niel and his sister,—the charming hostess and her daughter being not yet astir. This unexpected incursion threw the establishment, so to speak, out of its paces for two days; and Rhoda, full of indignation, took upon herself to speak to her aunt seriously, her aunt, who lay in bed, contemplating her niece with a serene, and beautiful countenance!

"Sure, darling, I don't know what you are talking about! I just brought in a few people to dine for a bit of a change; two of them officers; and I really did it to please Niel, as much as anyone. You know how he loves his own profession!"

"But Aunt Kitty, do just think of it! At half-past seven o'clock; and no preparation whatever for six strangers. Bridget was nearly out of her mind."

"Well, I'm sure the dinner was very nice. Brander declared he never tasted better soup—and as for the *soufflé*!—he was delighted with it. He said I must have a wonderful cook. And the ladies complimented me too."

"Yes," cried Rhoda, her long-suppressed indignation now boiling over, "and *you*—who had nothing to say to it!"

"Well, at least it was *I* who invited them here," replied Madame with dignified complacency.

"I hope you will never do such a thing again," retorted her exasperated niece. "Bryda was obliged to rush, and get out stores, and silver, and give a hand to the cook. I helped to lay the table, and make the beds—Niel had to go to the cellar."

"*That's* an easy job!" scoffed his step-mother.

"And he slept on the drawing-room sofa!"

"It's mighty comfortable, much better than his own bed, which is like a board. These little 'shakes-up' are good for people, and throw them out of their narrow ways. Your poor mother and I loved such excitements. Many a night we have slept on the floor in our time. Now it's not a bit of good your trying to scold me, darling, for I've done the same thing before, and will again!" and she snatched up Rhoda's hand, and kissed it.

But Rhoda was not to be beguiled or silenced by caresses. She solemnly assured her aunt, that the very next "surprise" party would fall flat, as she would be obliged to make all preparations, herself.

"What's that you say, darling? Sure, *I'm* no use at cooking, or setting out a table. I just sit in the drawing-room, and talk. That's all I'm good for!"

"Well, I'm afraid that that's all that will happen,

as far as your guests are concerned—for there will be no dinner, and no beds.”

“ So Bryda has been complaining, has she ? ”

“ No indeed, but I’ve eyes in my head, Aunt Kathleen, and I can see that she and Niel have to work hard, while you and Doatie, do nothing but amuse yourselves.”

“ Now Rhoda child, sure this is no way for you to speak to an aunt who is fond of you—and has given you a home.”

“ There’s where you make a mistake, Aunt Kathleen,” replied the girl with unexpected vehemence, “ and had I known the truth, I would never have come to Lismoyle. This is not *your* home—it belongs to Niel Conroy.”

“ And amn’t I Madame Conroy of Lismoyle ? ” demanded her aunt querulously.

“ Yes, you’re Madame Conroy of Lismoyle—till Niel marries.”

“ Oh ho, I see—it’s Niel this, and Niel that ; and he lends you the little bay mare to hunt twice a week. Well, well, you might do worse, than step into *my* shoes ! ”

“ Aunt Kathleen, don’t, please,” protested the heiress, her face ablaze. “ Never, never, say that to me again,” and without another word, she turned, and left the room.

“ Ah, ha ! ” murmured Madame, taking up her book with a smile. “ Now, I know what to do, when she begins to lecture—*that’s* the way to get rid of Rhoda ! ”

CHAPTER XXI

THE lecture, Rhoda had given her aunt failed to produce the smallest effect—in fact, Madame recalled it, as an absurdly comic episode! Two days later, her mentor discovered her in the drawing-room, a writing-table drawn up close to a roaring fire, engaged in filling in cards, and addressing a quantity of envelopes.

“What are you doing, dear?” she inquired, as she picked up one of the latter, inscribed to “The Countess of Dundalk, Carison.”

“Only sending out invitations for a little dance,” replied Madame, as she concluded, and blotted a note. “Now, darling,” glancing up at her niece, “there is not the least little bit of good in your looking at me with those owl’s eyes—just like Bry! The dance, will be on the twenty-fourth, at nine o’clock. I shall get three men and a pianist from Cork, as well as most of the sweets. We dance in the old ball-room—supper in the dining-room—bridge here—and refreshments in Niel’s den. With such a big house as this, it is a positive *sin* never to entertain.”

Still—in the words of Tennyson—her niece “neither spake nor moved,” as they faced one another across the littered table. She was wondering what was to be done, with such unyielding, adamantine, selfishness?

“You see, darling,” resumed her aunt in her softest and most caressing key, “we must not be mean. If I’ve nothing else left, I have my *pride*! We go to everything, and make no return. You can’t count those piffling tennis teas—and a return *is* expected. Cutlet for cutlet, you know! When little Captain Capel—‘Froggie’ as they call him in the regiment—saw the ball-room, he danced a breakdown, and wanted to know, why we never gave a hop? Everyone can see that he is tremendously taken with Doatie. They are both crazy about dancing, and she is one of the few girls here, that can do ‘the Boston.’ I tell myself, that if the worst came to the worst, the child can always make her living with her ten-toes. However, ‘Froggie’ is immensely rich, and will give her everything!”

“Does he wish to give her anything?” inquired Rhoda in a cool, matter-of-fact tone.

“My sweet girl,” exclaimed her aunt, throwing herself back in her chair, “*of course* he does! You don’t go out with us, or you wouldn’t ask such a question. But your chief amusement, as Lyddy says, is ‘galloping along the roads, plastering yourself with mud, and barging into other riders.’ If you had been to a few afternoon dances, you would soon understand. Doatie is twenty-four, and her front teeth

are getting discoloured. She's too thin—even for these thin days—and so I am naturally anxious to see her settled. In other words," gesticulating with both hands, "to get her off, before she 'goes off!' Rhoda, darling, you must help me. You are so affectionate and understanding—far more so than my own child, who never can be bothered to trim my hats, and *always* hooks me crooked! You are just your mother's daughter. Now, dear, this dance done in proper style, with a background of old silver, and pictures, and this fine house itself, will impress Froggie, and bring him to the point! I'm very sensitive in these matters. I know, that Froggie has a weakness for blue blood, and the ancestors will overawe him—they are not Doatie's ancestors, but they will do! After all, you know, he's only 'goat's milk cheese'; that's where his money comes from."

"How many have you invited?" inquired Rhoda, as she seated herself with a weary sigh.

"Only about one hundred and fifty. I began with a dozen couples—but you know how these things swell? Lyddy will bring a crowd, and there will be the military; now there are motors, distance is nothing. The ball-room floor must be seen to, the grooms can do it; *they* know all about polishing! Niel will have to order in seven or eight dozen of good champagne, and I have arranged for the moon. Now what do you say?"

"My dear Aunt Kathleen, I say, that you must not think of giving this dance."

"And, pray, why not?" demanded Madame, sitting suddenly erect, and planting her elbows on the table.

"Who's going to pay for it?" inquired her niece.

"There! it's always the same odious word—pay—pay—pay! Niel will pay, of course."

"But he has no money—at any rate, no money to spend on a ball. Dear Aunt Kathleen, you have such a kind, warm heart, can't you stop, and consider a little?"

"I consider, that he has this estate, and place," she answered sharply.

"Very heavily mortgaged."

"Well, I never could make head or tail of what a mortgage means," and Madame closed her eyes, and dropped her arms at her sides, with a gesture of abject hopelessness.

"It means, borrowing money on land, or houses; and so much has been borrowed on Lismoyle, that when the interest is paid, very little remains. The house is financed by the stable yard. We all live, in a way, on the horses. Niel keeps them, and they keep Lismoyle."

But she spoke to deaf ears. Madame nodded abstractedly; her thoughts engrossed in chiffons—then suddenly rousing herself, began to stamp her letters with laudable energy.

"These really must not go!" interposed Rhoda, laying a detaining hand on her aunt's wrist.

"Nonsense, darling! I've promised Doatie; and Niel will be only too thankful to see her married. They have never stabled the horses together—as any one with half an eye can see."

"Aunt Kathleen, I implore you to look things in the face, and try to understand the situation."

"Oh, yes, I understand perfectly, that you are desperately eager to save Niel's pockets!"

The girl flushed vividly, but still persisted:

"Don't you ever realize, how your absence and indifference, made it possible for Sullivan to ruin the estate?"

"*Rhoda!*" exclaimed her aunt, and her voice rose resentfully. "Is it for you, to lecture me, your nearest relative, your mother's own sister? The world is turned completely upside-down, since my day. The young people give their orders, and expect their elders to obey. I declare you are as bad as Doatie!"

"But I must speak to you seriously, Aunt Kathleen. I am sorry, but someone has to do it. The dinner-party, the other night, was bad enough. My knees are still aching from running up and down stairs. A ball, or any other entertainment—*no*."

"Who says 'No'?" demanded Madame imperiously.

"I do," replied Rhoda, with prompt decision. "At any rate, I shall not remain to witness it. If you post those invitations, I leave Lismoyle to-morrow. I should be ashamed to remain here, knowing that my own aunt and nearest relative—was determined to ruin the Conroys altogether."

"Ruin! Rubbish;—and you have nowhere to go to, you silly child!"

"A dozen," spreading out her hands as she spoke.

"Lady Dolly would be delighted to take me in, or the Melroses, or the Molyneux-Carters."

Madame scarcely recognized her niece in this white-faced, determined, young woman. If Rhoda departed, her money also vanished, and she had found five guineas a week extremely useful. She hesitated,—looked out of the window,—and fidgeted with her blotter; at last she said in a plaintive tone:

"Sure, it's only for Doatie, you know, and it may be the opportunity of her life."

"Am I to go or stay, Aunt Kathleen?"

"But think of poor Doatie!"

"Please answer me," insisted the girl, "as I may have to send a telegram by the post car."

For a full minute Madame remained mute. At last she drawled, in a peevish voice:

"To—stay—I suppose,—since you are so head-strong."

"Then please hand me over those invitations."

The would-be ball-giver gathered them up, like a mute, obedient child, and Rhoda, having economically removed the few unused stamps, made them into two packets, which she placed deliberately one after the other, in the fire.

"Oh, you are too, too cruel!" cried Madame, suddenly bursting into loud sobs. "Your mother would never have done such a thing—your mother loved a ball."

"So do I, Aunt Kathleen, but I should not love a ball at the expense of——"

Here the door opened to admit Bryda and Niel in splashed hunting kit, looking unusually cheerful and pleased with themselves, and bringing with them, a blast of the cold November air.

"What has happened?" inquired Bryda, as she came forward, amazed to see Madame's tear-stained face. "Any bad news?"

"No. I've just been feeling a little low, that's all," mumbled her step-mother.

But to Bryda, the disordered writing-table, the ashes, the scraps of envelopes, told a significant tale. Evidently Madame had been preparing one of her "surprises," and courageous Rhoda had routed her with great loss. Madame's tears were rare—unless evoked by laughter. Those in the present instance undoubtedly stood for a calamitous overthrow,—and the capture of her position, and guns.

If Niel noted traces of recent warfare, he was prudent, and made no observation.

"The usual tea and poached eggs?" he said to his sister, as he rang the bell. Then he turned to Rhoda:

"We've had a first-class day. It would have been a bit far for you, and we had lots of grief. Some fool, let a gate swing on Tommy Bingham, and it knocked him, and his horse, head over heels into a ditch full of mud. I never saw such an object as he was, when he was fished out. He looked——" and he burst into a laugh.

"Furious?" suggested Rhoda.

"Yes, he's calling for the life of a man in a rat-

catcher's kit, on a grey long-tail. We had two runs, and killed, the last from Rath-hilla. Bryda's mount was a bit done, and chanced his fences, didn't he, Bry? Chicane went splendidly, but I've had my last ride on him. I've sold him to the Colonel of the Hussars at Ballincollig; he says he has the makings of a chaser—he was always a natural 'lepper.' ”

“How much?” inquired Madame in a weak voice.

“One hundred and eighty. I've cleared about fifty on the deal. Ah, here comes Martin,” as the door opened. “I'm starving. What's this?” stooping to pick up a card. “Madame Conroy At Home, November 24th?”

“It's nothing, nothing, nothing!” she cried, snatching it out of his hand. “Just an idea. I wanted to have a little dance,” and her lips trembled, “a sort of return to the neighbours. We really owe it, and your fifty pounds might just do it; but Rhoda has made such a terrible fuss, that I've given it up.” As she announced this lamentable fact, she suddenly put her handkerchief to her mouth, and hurried out of the room,—instantly followed by her victorious, but tender-hearted niece.

“I say, I hope the idea won't return!” said Niel, as he helped himself to butter. “I think I see myself handing over fifty pounds to amuse the neighbours! I wonder how on earth Rhoda has managed to get the better of Madame? It's more than I have ever been able to accomplish, in ten years!”

CHAPTER XXII

TO Madame Conroy it seemed to be a special atonement for her disappointment, when the day after the scene with her niece, she received an invitation, on which was printed :

MR. PEDRO BRANDER

AT HOME

November 24th, 9.30.

Marshlands. Fancy Dress.

She flew out of bed, put on her dressing-gown, and rushed to tell the girls of this enchanting prospect.

"I believe it's thanks to *me*," she said, waving the card. "I told him we were all longing for a dance, but that none of us had the money, or the spirit, to give one, and so here it is!"

Dishevelled and delighted, she wandered about from room to room, declaiming, and discussing costumes, till at last the three girls combined in a body, and drove her back to her own apartment.

The anticipation of this ball threw the whole neigh-

bourhood into transports of joy. This would be no cheap subscription, five-shillings-a-head dance, with dry sandwiches, weak claret-cup, and a mere piano; but something on a large, and generous, scale!

Luncheon was barely finished before Mrs. Donovan, and Tom Bingham, motored over from Rahan, to discuss the great event, and consult about costumes! Madame and Doatie were celebrated contrivers,—with insignificant material, they had been known to achieve the most dazzling and astonishing results,—their advice would be valuable; and besides, there was Rhoda Kyle, who could tell them all about the latest fashions in fancy-dress in London,—and elsewhere. By tea-time, the little party had been augmented by the parson, his wife, and two hunting-men from Kilbeggan.

“So I hear Brander is getting a band from the Curragh,” said Bingham, as he bit into a hot cake. “Most of the supper from Dublin, and the fruit and flowers, from Covent Garden.”

“How have you found this out so soon, Tommy?” inquired Doatie in her most inquisitorial manner.

“Oh,” with cool assurance, “I find out most things sooner or later! The old conservatory is being done up for sitting out, the drawing-room, and boudoir are to have nice screens here and there, with a couple of chairs behind them. You all know the style!”

“These are *my* ideas,” announced Madame with great animation. “The other day, when Mr. Brander was here, and he was admiring this house, I said

what a lovely place Marshlands would be for a ball ! He asked me how *I* would set about it ? and I gave him no end of suggestions about the band, the supper, and the conservatory."

"And the two chairs behind the screen !" broke in Tom Bingham, and he covered his face with his brown, sinewy hands.

"There's no harm in two chairs," she protested. "Now, if it was *one*—— What are you going as, Tom ? "

"The Town-Crier," suggested Doatie.

"A nasty one for me ! No, no. I can do better than that. I have a splendid inspiration, but I'll keep it to myself. There's one thing I may tell you, —you won't know me, when you see me."

"That's a pleasure to look forward to !" declared his enemy, with her high-pitched laugh.

"And what about you, Lyddy ? " turning to Mrs. Donovan.

"Ah, that's another dead secret. And Niel ? " she inquired with undisguised interest.

"Oh, I've settled him," answered Madame. "He'll wear his old kit—Bengal Lancer uniform—it has a turban, gold sash, and long boots." Apparently her step-son's costume did not greatly interest her: looking round on the company with a happy smile, she added, with her usual bewildering inconsequence : "What do you think ? I'm getting a chauffeur at last ! I intend to use the car for the next month, and make a grand splash. We shall be able to go out

at night—to this ball, for instance—in real comfort, instead of a nasty, draughty, jingle. We will follow the hounds along the road, with no fear of the car shying, and rearing, and jumping ditches! In fact, we will do everything like other people. I can just manage to scrape up enough money to pay for the driver, and the petrol, and when the month is over, Doatie and I will fly to Dublin for a little spree. I really cannot stand the country, when it gets near Christmas, and people talk of nothing but twopenny cards, and the price of geese, and turkeys.”

Tea was nearly finished—cups had been replenished, and the cake-plates were beginning to thin—but the discussion about the ball still raged, when Mr. Brander was announced. The company immediately rose at him as one man (or woman) and overwhelmed him with exclamations, congratulations, and gratitude. A large chair was thrust forward, more tea was brewed, and the general benefactor was placed on Madame's right hand, where he sat listening to her eager questions, subtle flatteries and clever suggestions, with a broad, delighted smile upon his handsome, dark face.

Tom Bingham's information had been absolutely correct. Yes, it was true that he had set everything going, before the invitations were dispatched.

“I'm a practical sort of fellow, and look well ahead,” he admitted. “You've got to do that, out in the Argentine. As far as I can see, there's only one thing the ball will lack, and that is a lady to receive the guests!”

"And I suppose you couldn't supply her in time?" suggested Mrs. Donovan, looking at him with her head on one side. "Three weeks would be too short for the wooing, the wedding, and the honeymoon? However, you've all heard the story of the widower who brought his second wife out—sitting on the first one's coffin."

The well-known story of the widower and the coffin, fell somewhat flat.—Pedro Brander was a bachelor.

"That was rather too hasty, but 'Happy is the wooing that's not long a-doing,'" murmured Madame, with one of her most brilliant smiles.

On an occasion like the present, she was at her best. The rather dim lamplight, was kind to the lines on her forehead, and the stains on her once elegant teagown. Seated near the fine tea equipage, the firelight playing on her delicate face, her attitude a picture of graceful repose, Kathleen Conroy put all the other women in the room into the cold shade.

When her guests rose to depart, she gave Mr. Brander a warm invitation to remain to dinner. Laying her little hand upon his, she looked up into his face, and said in her charming, cajoling, way:

"Ah, *do*. I feel that I could tell you so much, and be a *real* help to you."

But in spite of this alluring offer, the big man did not succumb, and, to the great relief of Bryda, took his departure along with the crowd.

The next fortnight was given over to preparations

for the ball—by everybody except the hard-riding set. There was incessant dressmaking ; also consultations, telegrams, whisperings, and secrets. Lismoyle was littered with patterns, pictures, and materials—pins and scissors, were dangerously plentiful on sofas, and chairs.

The chauffeur had appeared—a smart, dapper little Frenchman, who spoke English fluently ; he drove well, and was the hardest-worked man about the place. To make up for lost time, the Panhard now lived upon the road, and could almost have found its way alone to Marshlands,—where Madame and Doatie helped forward arrangements for the ball, with commendable enthusiasm.

At last the great night arrived ! The Lismoyle party descended to the hall, where they frankly criticized one another ; and all the servants, stablemen and employees (including Big Jane) were assembled to see, and admire.

The first to appear was Madame, in a sweeping satin robe, “ Elizabeth Gunning, Duchess of Hamilton.” Her slender figure, regular features, rouge, powder, diamonds, and a most becoming dress transformed Madame into no bad imitation of the world-famed beauty ! The audience received her with a groan of admiration.

She was succeeded by her daughter as Undine ; an impression of green, silvery tulle, water-lilies, very bare arms, and a mane of tawny hair.

Next came Bryda—an Irish chieftainess, invested in

a gold torc, and the picturesque national mantle. She was immediately followed by Rhoda, resplendent in the beautiful court-dress, of a maid-of-honour, in the time of George the Second. She wore her own hair elaborately dressed; a primrose and silver brocade sacque over a white satin petticoat, and hoop; a long, pointed bodice, high-heeled shoes, a fan, patches and pearls. She looked delightfully pretty—as well as surprisingly dignified—and evoked a murmur of admiration from all but Big Jane, who had never attempted to conceal her hostility to the stranger. (It was undoubtedly owing to Miss Kyle, that the door into the garden was kept locked—the key not to be obtained on *any* pretence whatever; so she had told about the peaches! And if Mrs. Berrigan could see her way, she had resolved to pay the young woman out in proper style.) Last, but not least, descended the master of the house, an imposing figure in a splendid Hussar uniform, with a fur pelisse slung over his shoulder, his sabre under his arm.—Madame's casual choice of a Bengal cavalry kit had been indignantly repudiated—for the simple and ample reason, that to wear this as fancy dress, would be in direct defiance of army regulations. And Niel boldly announced that he did not intend to attend the ball—costume or no costume! This decision aroused a tempest of opposition, headed by Madame, who shrilly demanded “if it was likely that four lone women were going from Lismoyle, without one man to escort them? Why, they might

as well be a pack of schoolgirls! And, anyway, Pedro Brander would look upon Niel's absence as a terrible slight and offence." Ultimately it was Bryda, Bessie—and perhaps Rhoda—who persuaded Captain Conroy to change his mind, and take part in the scene of revelry.

His own inclination also pointed in the same direction, for in his heart he loved a good ball.

"Ye're getting to be a real old codger in your ways!" declared Bessie, "and the place is growin' on you. The only time you ever look like other young fellows, is when you're going off hunting—with a red coat on your back."

"All right, then, Bess, I'll wear my best red coat," he replied.

"No, you'll not, then! Not that sort of coat. There's a power of old clothes in this house. Hoops, and flowered gowns"—as she paused for a second he broke into a loud, derisive laugh. "Whist, now, be aisy," she remonstrated. "There's stores of coats, and breeches, and lovely uniforms. They made real good stuff in those days."

"Oh, well. If the uniforms are not moth-eaten, —and will hold together with decency, I don't mind having a look at some of them," he conceded.

The result of Captain Conroy's inspection, was the choice of a century-old gold-braided Hussar uniform, with dangling fur pelisse. This, when repaired, and supplemented with suitable boots and breeches, made a truly superb costume—and

proved remarkably becoming to a man of Conroy's type. He looked a soldier every inch, as he came clanking down the stairs; and his retainers gave him a reception even surpassing that accorded to Madame his step-mother. Only in *his* case, the admiration was undoubtedly tempered with awe. For wasn't the Captain the very "dead spit" of the officer in the smoking-room? He might have walked out of the frame!

The four ladies were carefully packed into the Panhard, whilst Conroy stepped into Mrs. Donovan's motor, which she had despatched to fetch him. Vainly had he struggled to evade this unnecessary civility—declaring, that he would sit in front with the chauffeur. But Lyddy Donovan, was, as usual, inflexible.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE avenue to Marshlands was illuminated with great flaring torches, and round and about the entrance to the house an enormous number of country folk had assembled, hoping to catch a glimpse of the guests as they passed into the hall. Their long tramps, and patience, were handsomely rewarded: naturally, the ladies' cloaks concealed most of their finery, but the arrival of a polar bear was hailed with shouts, and there were yells of laughter, when Tom Bingham—as "Monkey Brand Soap"—with whiskered face, and frying-pan in hand, capered up the steps. The appearance of Captain Conroy, in picturesque cavalry uniform,—a splendid jacket over his shoulder, and a sabre under his arm,—was hailed with murmurs of deep approval. It was generally agreed that the dress was French, and that he looked "lovely."

Mrs. Donovan, as a stalwart and splendid Cleopatra, hugging a jewelled asp,—generally mistaken for a lizard,—was followed by others too numerous to mention; among these Bluebeard and his wives,

caught the fancy of the spectators, and the party were loudly cheered.

For more than half an hour, the guests steadily poured in, and were received by Pedro Brander in a magnificent Spanish costume. By ten o'clock the large ballroom, the drawing-room, and sitting-out rooms were full. Everything (possibly thanks to Madame's suggestions) had been carried out on the most generous, not to say extravagant, scale. There were palms, bowers, and refreshment buffets, a first-class string band, a perfect floor—and the company corresponded with the entertainment.

Handsome prizes were allotted to the best characters, who before the dancing commenced, in an imposing procession of two and two, marched majestically round the ballroom.

The first prize was presented to Madame Conroy—a truly lovely vision—quite insistently effective. How wonderfully she had kept the gift of youth and beauty ! The second, was handed to a Burmese lady in elaborate dancing costume ; the third, to a large black bottle of Guinness's stout, with Froggie in the interior—an admirably contrived, life-like representation,—which, when a waltz struck up, wobbled round alone !

Then the dancing commenced, and everything went with that swing and go, and intense spirit of merry-making, incidental to an Irish ball. The costumes were as diverse as remarkable. A magnificent Henry VIII. paired off with a hospital nurse. The Kilkenny Cats, whirled round together with pre-

posterous exuberance. Mary Queen of Scots was flirting with Robinson Crusoe, whilst his Man Friday basked in the smiles of the Merry Widow.

Immediately on their appearance in the ballroom, Miss Conroy and Miss Kyle were surrounded by would-be partners. (Doatie's card had been filled up a week previously.) Rhoda gave the first dance to Niel, and when the band broke into "La Première Fois," they made what is known as "a flying start," and swung out into the middle of the room. Their steps suited exactly, and though he declared that it was a long time since he had "taken the floor," Conroy was an admirable performer, and his waltzing indicated considerable practice in the shiny East. In short, he and his partner were a remarkable and distinguished couple, and among the best dancers at the ball.

"This reminds me of good old Bareilly days!" he said. "Only that this floor, hasn't got such a tremendous spring."

"Yes," she replied, "I think that it was hung on chains, and many a waltz I have danced on it too. Do look at the Miss Moores," she said, "the Three Old Maids of Lee. Aren't they good?"

"Capital," he replied; "but I don't imagine the borrowed parrot is happy! I hope he won't use language!"

"If I had thought of it," she said, "I might have come as a Chinese lady, and brought Pekoe. Doesn't Aunt Kathleen look wonderful?"

"She does," he assented, "and she is wonderful. Unless I am mistaken, she engineered the whole of this affair. Well, let us make the best of the fun while it lasts!"

The waltz over, as they were passing through a doorway, Rhoda, to her amazement, came face to face with Captain Vydon! (The truth was that Algy Vydon found himself in desperate financial straits, and what he had said in a half-joke, had been obliged to fulfil in deadly earnest; he had come over to Ireland expressly to propose to Rhoda Kyle. If he was in a position to announce his engagement to an heiress, this delightful fact would shut the mouth of many hungry creditors, and re-establish his tottering credit. Should he not find immediate support,—there was nothing but ruin before him. His mother had assisted him to the utmost of her ability; he had borrowed exhaustively from friends and relatives, and the easy life of an unattached man about town was over—he was now absolutely at the end of his tether. Racing, gambling and speculations on the Stock Exchange had been Vydon's bane. He had enjoyed a good long day, "lived" every moment of his life,—reckless of the consequences,—and now, if he could not find a wealthy wife within a short time, would be obliged to fly the country.)

He looked remarkably smart, and at ease in the dress of a toreador,—which admirably suited his slim proportions, and dark good looks.

The moment he saw Rhoda, he struck an attitude, and gracefully saluted as in the bull-ring.

"Well, here I am!" he announced with an *empressement* that was overwhelming. "You remember I told you that I would look you up?"

"When did you come over?" she inquired, with an air of civil unconcern.

"Two days ago."

"And where are you staying?"

"With friends in Dublin. I have just run down for this dance," and he shot a glance at her companion.

"How is your mother, and where is she?"

"Oh, very fit. She's at Mentone, playing bridge as if her life depended on it. I hope you can spare me a couple of waltzes. I'm sorry I'm a bit late."

"I'm afraid I've got nothing left, but a set of lancers."

"Lancers—oh, Lord! Can't you forget one or two partners?"

"I'm afraid not," she replied, with smiling decision.

"Well, all right—thanks for small mercies," and scribbling on his programme, the Toreador passed on.

"Who is that fellow with the crafty black eyes?" inquired Niel.

"Captain Vydon. We know him in London, and his mother—she's a dear. Auntie and I are very fond of her."

"Lucky old woman! And what about the son?"

Rhoda merely shook her head, and said quickly:

"I should like some iced coffee."

When the band struck up the lancers, Captain Vydon hastened to claim his partner.

"I say," he began, "supposing we sit this out?"

"With all my heart," agreed Miss Kyle.

"Isn't this a gay scene? Quite a wonderful collection of good dresses. Who was the fellow you were dancing with just now?"

Captain Vydon had a way of standing very close to a woman—as it were, towering over her, and looking down into her eyes. It was an attitude that Rhoda particularly disliked, and she backed a little, as she replied:

"That was Captain Conroy."

"Your cousin?"

"No—no relation—my aunt's step-son."

"Oh, smart-looking chap! He dances all right. Is he still soldiering, or what's his business?"

"His business is trying to make both ends meet. He farms, and sells horses."

"Oh! Is your aunt here?"

"Yes, there she is, dancing with Mr. Brander."

"What!" he exclaimed. "Not the beauty in blue and pearls?"

"But why not?"

"By Jove! an extraordinarily pretty woman! She's not your own aunt, of course."

"She is. My very, very, own," declared Rhoda.

Vydon gazed at her gravely, as if anxiously searching for traces of the family beauty in her face.

"And I daresay, you will be surprised to hear, that she has a daughter as old as I am," continued Rhoda. "That is her, with the green, and silver dress."

"Do you mean that noisy girl chattering to the black bottle? Who'd have thought it! I say, let's go and look for a comfortable retreat.

Captain Vydon, being an expert in this sort of exploration, soon discovered two nice, unobtrusive chairs, under some palms in the conservatory.

As they seated themselves, he said:

"I'm delighted to see that Ireland suits you. I expect you have plied the tomahawk freely, and wear many scalps? You look ripping, and your dress is a tremendous success."

"I'm glad you like it. It's a real old costume, which I wore at the Albert Hall fancy ball.—I brought it over on chance."

"You and your aunt's step-son seem to have gone in for the same period," observed Vydon, with marked significance.

"It was not a preconcerted plan," she answered impassively. "And in this character, I am supposed to be at least *eighty* years his senior!"

"Hullo! Talk of the devil! here he comes!" as Conroy and Mrs. Donovan passed by—she, walking a little in advance (handsome, magnificent and elated), evidently in quest of some suitable retreat.

"I say," continued Captain Vydon, "do you see that very gorgeous lady? She and I came home on board ship together from Colombo—about ten years ago. It's extraordinary how one tumbles over people in the most unexpected places. I suppose you know her?"

"Oh, yes. She lives close to Lismoyle, and has a beautiful place—Rahan Court."

"And what has become of the husband?"

"I think he died eight or nine years ago."

"And she is still Mrs. Donovan or De Novan,—as she prefers to be called? Such rot!"

"Mrs. Donovan—yes, and enormously rich."

"Ah!"—after a reflective pause. "When do you expect Mrs. Kyle?"

"Not till the end of March, or perhaps April."

"Er—her absence seems to sit upon you very lightly."

"Yes, and mine on her, I trust. She's having such a delightful time. They are now in Java."

"Java!" he repeated, with raised eyebrows. "You are joking!"

"No, I can assure you, that Java is quite the fashion."

"Look here, Miss Kyle," he said, with a sudden change of voice, hitching his chair a few inches nearer, and bending towards her. "Do you know, that I've come down to this ball, all the way from Dublin, solely to see *you*?"

"That was very friendly of you," she replied, as she lifted her frank, careless eyes to his face.

"Well—er—I don't want you to look at me exactly in the character of a friend."

"No?" she coloured. Alas! alas! The proposal she had so long eluded, was, unless she was mistaken,—imminent.

"You know very well, Rhoda, without my telling you, that I have been absolutely devoted to you for years," urged her suitor, leaning towards her so intimately, that the delicate perfume on his hair, was easily recognized—and subsequently abhorred. "You know, my mother loves you, as her own daughter. I've come here to-night to ask, if you will marry me?" Here he made an attempt to take her hand,—but was unsuccessful.

"Now, now, at least give me a hearing!" he protested, with a touch of passion. "I've often tried for this chance, but I never could find it, somehow—I was always headed off! I heard you were to be at this ball to-night, and so I came on purpose, to try my luck. I say nothing about myself or my own feelings; you know me by this time—I honestly believe, that we should hit it off splendidly. We have the same friends, we have the same tastes. My mother is devoted to you—your aunt likes me; and now, Rhoda, the question is—what do *you* say?" and he devoured her face, with his hungry black eyes.

Rhoda was sensible of acute discomfort. "I'm really very sorry——" she began.

"There, that's enough!" he exclaimed, springing to his feet. "I understand—I'm turned down!"

"But please *do* let me speak," she pleaded, also rising. "It is true—all you say about your mother, and my aunt, and our mutual friends; and I shall be glad to continue to be your friend, Captain Vydon—but I never could be anything else!"

"Then there is no more to be said," he replied, with a look that was half bitter, half insolent. "The dance is over, and as far as *I'm* concerned, the lights are out! We may as well return to the ballroom."

At this moment the appearance of Froggie created a merciful diversion. He had discarded the black bottle,—left it standing in a corner of the ballroom,—and now emerged as an imp! His large head, very thin arms and legs, huge hands and feet, helped him to impersonate the character, as he careered about, apparently delighted with his freedom, and in search of partners; he now craved the honour of a dance with Miss Kyle.

The supper was magnificent, the spirits of the company were raised to the highest possible pitch. As the night wore on, the guests enjoyed themselves more and yet more, and the ballroom appeared to be flooded with joy, excitement, and glamour. The recent scene in the conservatory had rather damped Rhoda's pleasure; but she noticed that her toreador soon consoled himself; had she not beheld him, swimming round the room, clasping the portly form of the overwhelming Cleopatra, and subsequently sitting out with her?—Yes.—With a few dexterous advances, he had established himself in the lady's good graces.

As Rhoda and Niel passed by, he remarked to his gorgeous companion:

"I know that girl very well in London. Her aunt and my mother are pals. Miss Kyle had rather a bad nervous breakdown; she's a queer, uncertain sort

of creature. It looks as if it was a case between her and that fellow Conroy."

Mrs. Donovan drew herself up, took a long breath, and clenching her hands on her fan, demanded :

"What makes you think so?"

"Only my eyes—it's a sort of thing, that never can be concealed—like smoke—you know the saying?" Worldly wise Vydon, had grasped the situation—the jealous widow, would avenge him!

"What sort of thing do you mean?" persisted his partner.

"Oh, *you* know; sitting out in corners, hanging on one another's lips, and so on. I can't exactly explain, but I don't mind making you a small bet, that I am right. He's a good-looking chap—and they're about the best dancers in the room.—Shall we take another turn?"

It must be acknowledged, that several of the company danced continuously and conspicuously together;—for instance, Doatie and her imp—Madame and Brander,—Miss Kyle and Captain Conroy. He was, as Vydon had said, a first-rate performer; and enjoyed himself with an abandon, that amazed Rhoda and Bryda—who had never yet witnessed the social aspect, of her hard-working brother. Having accomplished certain duty dances, with the Moores, Mrs. Donovan, and various hunting-women, he applied to Rhoda for "extras"; and it must be confessed, that she effected some extraordinary alterations and revisions in her programme! How she dealt with certain disappointed

cavaliers, who shall say? After all, it was only for one evening, and she was resolved to make the most of it. To-night, Niel was like one of her usual gay London partners. She felt almost dizzily happy, and laughed, and danced, and flirted—precisely as if he and she were in Mayfair. He appeared to be completely metamorphosed—not merely in dress, but in character! A gallant, handsome, reckless Hussar, who talked amusing nonsense, and danced like a dream. At one moment, he pretended that he was the original O'Conroy—to whom the uniform had belonged, and who had fought in the Peninsula, and at Waterloo. He gave her a lively account of Brussels in June, 1815—and of his charming partners at the Duke of Richmond's historic ball,—where he declared, that he had danced six times with Mrs. Rawdon Crawley! For her part, Miss Kyle, maid-of-honour to Queen Caroline, discoursed in a sprightly manner of her gay doings at Kensington and Richmond; her passion for chocolate, the minuet, and faro. She touched on the latest court gossip, and imparted her private opinion of the great Walpole. It was all very delightful and amusing—but, alas! how short! To-morrow, she would once more be a somewhat unnoticed guest—he, her busy, pre-occupied host, weighed down with anxieties, and the burden of a mortgaged estate. Hours flew, and still the ball was kept up with extraordinary *verve*, and animation. The soup and quails were hot, —the ices delicious—the champagne unimpeachable.

There had scarcely been one *contretemps*. The only untoward incident occurred: when Madame's chauffeur (who had undoubtedly supped) presented himself in the ballroom, where, being mistaken for one of the characters, he was invited to dance by a lively female in cap and bells. Rhoda and her partner were aghast, when they beheld Dufour, figuring in the same set of lancers; but as they did not wish to make a scene, or interrupt the pleasures of the moment, they agreed to keep the hideous secret, and saluted the chauffeur and his partner with the most elaborate courtesy. But when the performance came to an end, Niel sternly removed the interloper—whom he found at the buffet, regaling his partner with champagne, and various *risqué* and imported stories—the drift of which, the uneducated young lady fortunately did not grasp. Conroy expostulated severely with Dufour in his somewhat rusty French, excused him to the unsuspecting lady, and consigned the unbidden guest into the charge of a stern-faced butler,—who had formerly been in the police. Finally, at five o'clock on a pitch-dark morning, the great fancy ball broke up. The flaring torches had died out, the band was sleepy—and the ices were exhausted. As almost every guest had remained till the last moment, the confusion in the cloakroom, and at the scene of departure was absolutely indescribable. Many wraps and coats were carried away by mistake—and it was often a week or more, before an exchange was effected. In the case of Madame's superb opera-cloak (a silver brocade

lined with ermine), a shabby "Aquascutum" was left as its substitute! The cloak took two months' leave of absence—ultimately returning in a disgracefully soiled, and dissipated condition.

Niel, who had succeeded in eluding Mrs. Donovan, secured a lift in a friendly dog-cart, along with the Kilkenny Cats; the Lismoyle ladies, who were all dead tired, especially Madame ("without a foot under her" as she expressed it), were safely conveyed home, and it was only when they descended from the motor, and closed its door, that they beheld a large coronet staring them in the face, and found that they had taken possession of the noble Panhard belonging to the Earl of Dundalk! What, then, had become of Madame's own car? It was hopeless to inquire of the chauffeur, who was too much abstracted to remember anything, beyond the fact that it was "aw ri'." He and Lord Dundalk's man were old associates, and had been celebrating their recent merry meeting in Mr. Brander's champagne.

Madame's beautiful new Panhard, was subsequently discovered in a farmyard near Kilbeggan, where it had proved a delightful (if transitory) toy for the farmer's children. The unfortunate Earl and Countess of Dundalk and Lady Viva Dodder, after vain searchings, and summonses, for their car and driver, had been reluctantly compelled to undertake the twelve long miles to Carison, in a rickety, draughty "jingle."

CHAPTER XXIV

AFTER the great fancy ball, came the usual deadly reaction. Most people felt miserably dull, but mitigated their condition by driving about from house to house, and discussing triumphs, absurdities, and mistakes. Mrs. Donovan was one of the first to descend upon Lismoyle. Wearing her best furs, she, so to speak, flowed into the room, prepared to enjoy a thoroughly exhaustive gossip and a good tea.

She overwhelmed Madame with congratulations on her appearance and success.

"You were just a wonder, Kitsey! The star of the evening, my dear!"

She was also genial and flattering to Bryda and Doatie; but to Rhoda her manner was so frosty, that it might almost have lowered the temperature.

"What news have you from your aunt?—and when is she returning?" was a question she had put to the girl, more than once; but to-day it seemed to be aggressive and demanded at the sword's point!"

"I hear from her every week. She is quite well, thank you, and still in Java."

"Oh—Java!" repeated Mrs. Donovan, and with a strange, hostile look, she turned her broad back upon Mrs. Kyle's niece.

Addressing herself to Madame, she said :

"I met a man at the ball I knew years ago—Captain Vydon ; I daresay you noticed him, dressed as a bull-fighter, and very good-looking. He lives in London with his mother, Lady Vydon, and moves in tip-top society. I've asked him down for a couple of weeks' hunting after Christmas, as he is frightfully keen. Of course, I shall have chaperons—Colonel and Mrs. Grant, and Lizzie Birken."

"Yes—just a nice hunting set ! I expect you will enjoy yourselves, though I cannot understand, what pleasure you all find in it. As for me—the moment I'm put on a horse's back, I become a quivering jelly."

"We find health, tremendous fun, and sport, lots of good friends, and good fellowship."

"Oh, yes, my dear. I can understand *that* part of it," assented Madame, with an indulgent smile. "There are no end of flirtations—yes, and runaway matches—begun in the hunting-field."

"And so you are off to Dublin to-morrow," said her friend calmly, ignoring this libel on Irish morality. "You and Doatie in great style, in the new car."

"Yes ; you see, ever since the ball, we have been feeling as flat as two pancakes. Mrs. Sinclair comes here for her visit—we are like Box and Cox. I can't bear the sight of her, and she strongly disapproves of me !"

"Never mind; I know somebody who strongly *approves* of you!" rejoined Mrs. Donovan with extraordinary significance. Madame's pretty face beamed with complacency, although she put up a protesting hand, and murmured—"Nonsense—nonsense!"

"I do hope August will be sober," she continued. "Niel wanted to pack him off at once, but then I should have had to pay his fare up to Dublin, and he may just as well motor us there."

"Yes, and smash you up on the way," said her visitor. "I call that penny-wise, and pound-foolish!"

"Oh! he won't transgress again. He wept and howled, and said it was the beautiful ladies, and the dresses, that turned his head,—and that he didn't know what he was doing."

"And you believed him? Well, I declare!" ejaculated Mrs. Donovan.

"No, of course I didn't believe him," replied Madame. "Do you take me for a born fool? But he was all right the next day, returned Lord Dundalk's motor, and fetched mine. By the by, I had to write a frightfully abject letter to her ladyship. It took me a good half-hour. And when I had finished, I sprinkled water over it, to make believe for *tears*. Wasn't that clever?" And she burst into a delighted laugh.

Mrs. Donovan nodded assent, and added: "Yes, there's no denying your cleverness in *some* ways, Kitty. In spite of your mistakes,—you come out on top!"

"Her ladyship was furious at going home in the

jingle—on such a cold night, too. She thought it was some sort of practical joke we had been up to. However, I think it's all right now. Tell me, my dear Lyddy, really and truly, how do you think I looked at the ball ? ”

“ Splendid ! Beautiful as a picture ! There were no two opinions about that,” was her confidant's reassuring reply. “ Captain Vydon couldn't believe that Doatie was your daughter. He said, that you were more like sisters.”

“ He'd better not tell that to Doatie to-day,” said her mother, “ for the poor girl is in awfully low spirits, lying down with a bad headache. The Galloping Greens are off to England—sudden marching orders.”

“ Has he said anything ? ” whispered Mrs. Donovan. “ Or written, and made an offer ? ”

“ No, my dear, I'm afraid not ; and, you see, towards the end of the evening, when she got hot, and crushed, and limp, poor Doatie *did* look rather a streel ! ”

As the girls were entirely excluded from this conversation by the two ladies—who had the best part of the fire—they one after another left the room ; but it was a full hour, before Mrs. Donovan took her departure. That same evening, when Rhoda found herself alone with her aunt, Madame came up to her, put her arm round her waist, and said :

“ Well, Doatie and I are off to-morrow morning, and old Aunt Grace will be here to do chaperon. I expect you and she will get along all right ; but a

word in your ear, darling—keep out of Lyddy Donovan's way as much as you can, for for some reason or other, she has got her knife into you ! ”

“ But why ? What have I done ? ” inquired Rhoda, with raised brows and an air of injured innocence.

“ That I can't tell you. Lyddy takes notions into her head, and when she's on the war-path, doesn't stick at a trifle. But, from what I know of you, my dear, I think you can take pretty good care of yourself.”

* * * * *

Madame and Doatie departed the next morning, and the same afternoon Niel drove down to Doonbeg, to meet his Aunt Grace, a plain, stoutly built, elderly lady, with a square jaw, and a benevolent expression.

Mrs. Sinclair had frequently paid long visits to Lismoyle in her sister's lifetime.—She was ten years older than the first Madame Conroy, and had always been lively and agreeable, but never a beauty ; her nose was undecided in its contour, and although she inherited the family teeth, and hair, yet her face exhibited one or two luxuriant, and disfiguring moles. At sixty, she was a strong, sturdy matron, who made no attempt to struggle with the hand of time. She wore caps and flowing skirts (indoors) and various barbaric gold ornaments. Her late husband had been a retired Indian civilian—with a liver. Grace Joyce was forty, when she had, so to speak, “ carried him off ” from a crowd of competing spinsters ; her kindly nature,

unselfishness, and ready wit, had won the day. She now lived happily among a circle of old friends, in a small but comfortable house in Cheltenham. Here various Anglo-Indian tastes, had been grafted on to her Irish ways; her curries were notable, her mango chutneys highly esteemed, and her drawing-room smelt of "cuscus" and sandalwood.

Immediately on her arrival, Mrs. Sinclair settled down at Lismoyle as easily and promptly as if she had not left it for more than a day,—instead of a whole year. Acquainted with all the neighbours and every one of the people on the place, she was generally liked and respected;—by the retainers,—as a born lady, who was generous with her half-crowns, and by surrounding society, as a Miss Joyce, of Ardmore Castle, one of a race who had been great people in their time. Mrs. Sinclair was by no means affluent, having, beside her Indian pension, but a small income. Nevertheless, she always contrived to bring over some suitable sensible presents, that added to the comfort of the home of her niece and nephew. From a distance, she had contemplated Miss Kyle's prolonged visit, with an eye of indignant dissatisfaction. Why should Madame quarter her needy relative upon poor overburdened Niel? But after a day or two's personal acquaintance, she was entirely reconciled to this arrangement, and took an unexpected liking for Madame's niece, and Bryda's dearest friend.

The shaft from Captain Vydon's bow, shot at a venture, had found its home in Mrs. Donovan's

heart, where it rankled painfully. Lookers on, she assured herself, see most of the game in this world's affairs, and the sooner Rhoda Kyle took her departure from Lismoyle, the better for all parties; and she was resolved to do her utmost, to promote a coolness between the interloper, and Niel Conroy—assured that his pride would be her staunch ally. As she and Niel were riding home after a day's hunting, followed at some distance by Bryda and Tom Bingham, she announced:

"After Christmas, I am expecting Captain Vydon on a little visit. I met him years ago on board ship—last time Michael and I returned from Melbourne. He knows Rhoda Kyle very well, and says she's such a typical Londoner, he's astonished at her remaining over here for months, and months."

"Oh! Is he?" said Conroy. "I'm sure she would be immensely flattered by his interest. I believe her liking for this part of the world, is accounted for by her Irish blood. She was sick of the racket of London, and is naturally fond of the country, and animals—dogs especially. Her aunt bars all pets, except a rascally old parrot."

"Well, anyway her visit has been of *some* use."

"Yes, she looks a different girl, doesn't she?"

"Oh, I'm not thinking of her looks," said Mrs. Donovan stolidly—"but of the look of your house-keeping books! Her five guineas a week is a nice help to Bryda, isn't it?"

"Her *what*?" he cried, suddenly reining up.

"Oh, didn't you know?" exclaimed his companion, with superbly acted surprise. "She pays that weekly in advance—ever since she set foot in Lismoyle."

"No, no, Lyddy," contradicted her companion; "excuse me,—but I absolutely refuse to believe it."

"Believe me or not, as you please! All I can say is, that Rhoda Kyle told me so herself," announced Mrs. Donovan,—her pulses leaping with vindictive excitement. "Ah, I see you are astonished! How nicely they kept you in the dark! So you had no idea you had a lodger," and she laughed derisively. "The arrangement was made with Madame."

"With Madame?" he repeated. "Of course, that explains it!"

For the remainder of the ride, Mrs. Donovan's escort was more or less silent. He was filled with rage, shame, and humiliation, to think that all the time a girl he believed to be his guest,—and in a way confidant,—had been secretly paying what amounted to a stiff weekly bill at a country hotel! In vain, did Lyddy talk to him, vainly did she chaff, flatter, or sympathize. His answers were short and indifferent, and for once she found herself up against a wall of cold resistance, as hard, and unresponsive, as a block of marble. They parted at the gates of Rahan with brief good-nights, and the lady assured herself, as she cantered up the drive, that "she wouldn't be in that girl's shoes, for a thousand pounds!"

CHAPTER XXV

AS soon as he had dismounted, and made his way into the house, Niel sent for his sister, and imparted his discovery. He looked alarmingly white and grim, as he stood on the smoking-room hearth-rug, in his spattered leathers, and rusty red coat.

"I never heard a word of it till this moment," declared Bryda, "although Rhoda has been here for months, and I certainly thought, I was in her confidence."

"Well, you see you were mistaken!" rejoined her brother, "and Madame has collared eighty guineas. This will explain, why she started the car."

"But what *are* we to do?"

"Accept nothing—not one single farthing! I'll have a talk with Rhoda myself. Fancy her paying five guineas a week 'unbeknownst,' for the privilege of being your understudy! The whole thing is absolutely sickening!"

"I suppose there will be ructions," said Bryda. "You know, Niel, you can be very black, and Rhoda,

no doubt, will go away. If she does, I shall miss her dreadfully. You've no idea what a help she is, always so bright and cheerful,—yet she feels acutely, that it is her own aunt who has brought most of the trouble upon us. If she had understood the true condition of affairs, she would never have come over, I am sure."

"So am I," he agreed, in a tone of sombre conviction. "Ignorance is bliss!"

"Not in all cases. For instance, not when I leave Mrs. Carmody to make the mulligatawny," said Bryda on her way to the door. "Don't be too hard on Rhoda!" And with an impressive nod, she left the room.

Her brother flung himself into an arm-chair in front of the fire, and clasped his hands behind his head. "Don't be too hard on Rhoda!" he muttered to himself. For many a day, he had realized that he had to thank his flighty step-mother for bringing him face to face with his fate, and introducing under his roof, the only girl he ever cared for. Rhoda Kyle had imported a new element into dreary, poverty-stricken, Lismoyle. Her bright face, light foot, and happy laugh, as she flitted about the house, were far from being lost on Conroy—unconscious and indifferent as he appeared. Naturally a girl like Rhoda would never cast a thought to a stupid, poor devil like him—who had nothing to offer her, but a ramshackle old place, his debts, and himself. A girl who,—as he gathered from casual scraps of her conversation,—

had been about the world for the last six years ; had danced at Court balls in London, and Rome ; been a frequent visitor in smart country houses, and mixed in the most brilliant society. Of course, this Irish visit was a mere temporary whim ; she would presently come to the end of her craze for country life, and return to her natural element—the gay world.

He had kept purposely aloof from her on the principle of self-preservation,—as he was determined not to singe his wings more than he could help. No doubt Rhoda thought him gruff, and unsociable : it was best that it should be so. She little dreamt, that many a night, when he was supposed to be busy with accounts and correspondence, he was merely sitting before the fire—as now—with the door ajar, listening to her singing, and longing to join her. Or, that, when he left her to dismount from her hunter unassisted, he resisted a crazy impulse to lift her from the saddle, and kiss her happy, animated face ! in which case, she would undoubtedly have fled from Lismoyle within the hour. Her departure would, in a sense, release him from vigilant self-repression, and his own stern custody ; in one way, he craved for his freedom, yet, on the other hand, he dreaded the fateful day, as if it were some slow-footed, inevitably approaching, tragedy.

Hers was the stimulating, sustaining spirit that brought gaiety into the household ; Bryda was too anxious and busy—a household Martha ; Madame hopelessly foolish ; Doatie a brooding storm-cloud.

But Rhoda's charming personality, radiated sunshine! She widened their horizon, dragged them out of their dull routine, introduced new books, interesting topics, photography, puzzle games, and jokes. To him, she was always cheery and friendly; argued with him; laughed at him; and with her enchanting smile, and dancing brown eyes, had unconsciously stolen his heart, and his peace!

To-night, he was resolved to have it out with her about the payment—this secret, underhand payment of five guineas weekly. How shameless of Madame to accept, and spend, the money! Anyway, it was five times too much. Probably Rhoda would make a stand, and refuse to remain at Lismoyle, merely as a friend and guest. Well, he would see about that! What a queer sort of maze his life had become involved in these last two years. Whichever way he turned, the outlook seemed hopeless. With this depressing conviction in his mind, Conroy went away to change his muddy hunting-kit, and summon Martin to bring his bath.

That evening, in the drawing-room after dinner, when Mrs. Sinclair was nodding over her knitting, and Bryda had departed to inspect her incubators, and "rearer," Niel came into the room, and drew up a chair close to where Rhoda was working by a lamp.

"Look here, Rhoda, I've something to say to you," he began abruptly. She looked up, needle in hand.

"I heard to-day, for the first time, that all these months at Lismoyle, you have been a paying guest."

"Why, of course," she admitted, with a heightened

colour. "You don't suppose I would have consented to come otherwise, and billet myself upon you for a long visit? You know it is quite a recognized arrangement between friends. It was all settled with Aunt Kathleen before I came over. And so," looking into his face with steady eyes, "Mrs. Donovan has let the cat out of the bag?"

"She has, and I am much obliged to her," he replied with emphasis. "We Conroys, as you know, have fallen low enough, but a little modest hospitality is still in our power, and as yet, we don't pretend to take in lodgers." Niel's pride had been cut to the quick, and he was ruthless.

The lodger's face flamed. She slowly put down her work, folded her hands, and gravely considered her companion; undoubtedly the barometer stood at "Stormy."

"I came here, under a misapprehension," she declared with unexpected composure. "I understood that Lismoyle belonged to my aunt, and when Mrs. Donovan opened my eyes (and I see she's given to opening people's eyes), I decided to return to London the following day. But she implored me to remain, assuring me that I was bound to like Aunt Kathleen, and to love Bryda; and that the money that I was to pay, would be a—a help."

Niel listened with frowning attention, and in dead silence, and she went on hastily—being painfully anxious, that he should understand the situation.

"I may tell you honestly, that I was desperately

keen, to assist, even in such a very small way. I paid Aunt Kathleen monthly in advance, and she begged me to say nothing to Bryda or you ; as you were both so terribly proud, but she assured me, that my little contribution, would go into the household bills, somehow or other, in payment for wages, or coal. I do hate being obliged to have this money talk with you, hate it more than I can express ; but if you think that I have deceived you, and taken a great liberty, I assure you, that it has been unintentional.—At any rate, I meant well.”

“ The money, you must look upon as a gift to Madame,” said Niel, and the lines in his face hardened ; “ not a farthing has she subscribed to the house-keeping fund—and for this, I am most sincerely thankful. In future, there is an end to all payments.”

“ Then in that case, I must depart—I have no other alternative. Do you suppose, knowing all I do, that I am likely to remain here, and add to your burthen ? ”

“ Rhoda, you know you are talking nonsense, and are neither burthen, nor expense—but our guest, and friend.”

“ Even so, I could not stay,” and she made a little gesture of protest. “ As it is, I am covered with shame.”

“ So am I,” he retorted with significance.

“ When Mrs. Sinclair leaves,—I shall go with her.”

“ No ; why on earth should you ? Your aunt, Mrs. Kyle, is not due for months. Stay on here like a true comrade, and see us through our troubles.”

"What do you mean?—what troubles?"

"I told you, that I was superstitious; and I feel sure, that some misfortune is about to happen." There was a curious halting note in his voice as he added: "One of the old yews in the burying-ground has fallen."

"Oh, Niel, how can you?" she protested impatiently. "Surely there are enough calamities in the world, without looking for signs, and omens."

"Unfortunately, I believe in signs and omens, and unless I am mistaken, you will see that we shall be in a bad hole, or meet with a serious loss,—before long."

"Niel," interrupted a drowsy murmur, "have I been asleep? That walk those girls took me this afternoon, was a little beyond my distance. What are you two putting your heads together about?" turning to survey them.

"Family superstitions," replied Rhoda promptly.

"Oh, the Conroys are as superstitious as if they lived in the Middle Ages. Come along, Niel, and let us have our game of picquet."

The grand explosion anticipated by Mrs. Donovan had evidently fizzled out! The English girl was hunting as usual, and appeared to be in excellent spirits, and went remarkably well, with Gabby Moore as pilot. It was wonderful,—all she had got out of her horse. Two good days a week, and the little bay was never sick or sorry—but then Rhoda Kyle was a light weight. Mrs. Donovan's own weight, was becoming

a most urgent question, and to keep down her adipose tissue, she took saccharine and long walks. One day, on the road not far from Lismoyle, she encountered Big Jane—Big Jane, with a “lock” of potatoes (and other odds and ends) concealed in her capacious apron. Mrs. Donovan always had a word with Big Jane, who, according to local rumour, was neither more nor less than her late husband’s second cousin—a fact ignored by both; but now and then a substantial present found its way into Jane’s most squalid dwelling, and now and then, Big Jane was in a position to offer her rich connection a valuable morsel of news. On this occasion, Mrs. Donovan halted in the middle of the road, and in her most affable manner inquired :

“ Well, Jane, how are you these times ? ”

“ Pretty middlin’, ma’am ; and how is yourself ? ”

“ Oh, I’m all right. I suppose your geese are coming on now. You may as well send me up half a dozen, fit to kill, and for God’s sake, Jane, don’t pluck them alive ! You know they say you do, Jane ; and upon my word, if I thought it was true I’d be done with you, and that’s as sure as my name is Lydia Donovan.”

“ Ah, sure, you shouldn’t believe half the lies that does be goin’. I suppose it was old Mary above told you that. She’s a nice piece of furniture ! ”

“ If you mean a very decent woman, she’s all that,” retorted Mrs. Donovan.

“ An’ don’t I know very well, that no one at

Lismoyle can do wrong in your eyes?" replied Jane, with a glimmer of insolence, on her shiny red face.

"When is Madame expected home?" asked Mrs. Donovan abruptly.

"I don't rightly know, but I can tell you one thing"—she paused, and gave her apron a hitch.

"What's that?"

"It's a *new* Madame we'll be gettin' before long."

"Who?"

"Why, the English girl, to be sure." Mrs. Berrigan watched her questioner with covert intentness, as she added: "She and the Captain, does be mighty friendly."

"What do you call friendly?" Mrs. Donovan leaned heavily on her stick, and her heart was throbbing in violent jerks, as she awaited Jane's somewhat tardy reply.

"Well, I've seen them carousing around the garden together talking very earnest, and him making up to her with flowers." Here she paused for a moment in order to construct a frightful untruth. "And the other evening, when I was passing the drawing-room windows, I chanced to look in, and by the firelight I got a sight of them. You couldn't put a pin between their two heads,—and he was kissing the face off her! . . . May I never die, but it's the Holy Truth. Oh, she's one of your deep ones, as close as a box snail!"

Mrs. Donovan recovered herself with a superhuman effort. At last she said in a faint, far-away sort of voice:

" Well, I suppose Captain Conroy must marry some day."

" Yes," agreed Jane, with an air of magnificent acquiescence. " But a fine, upstanding, handsome lady—not a little squirt of a girl like that ! "

" Well, good-night, Jane. You can send up the geese," and with a nod her patroness walked on.

Jane remained standing in the middle of the road looking after her distant connection, with a very sour face. " Lydia Donovan, indeed ! and wouldn't she give the two eyes out of her head to be Lydia Conroy ? and hasn't she been making shapes at him for years ? Unless I'm mistaken, she'll stoke it pretty hot for that girl. As for the plucking—I'll just do as I like with my own geese," and giving her apron a violent hitch, she resumed her tramp.

Mrs. Donovan proceeded in the opposite direction with a whirling brain. Jane's words, and above all, the expression "*kissing the face off her*," roared and boomed in her ears, as with tapping stick, she hurried along the hard, frost-bound road. Had any acquaintance met her, they would have been astonished at her appearance, and would scarcely have recognized the genial, jovial, Mrs. Donovan, in this elderly individual, with the drawn, and ravaged, countenance.

The envious, jealous, miserable, woman, spent the evening alone. She could not read, she could not play Patience, she did not even care to smoke ; but paced up and down the little drawing-room, with the measured, steady tread of an animal, within its

limited cage. So apparently Niel had escaped her ! The idea grew and grew, and clouded her mind. Naturally shrewd and sensible, she realized that if Niel were in love with Rhoda Kyle, there was little use in struggling to hold a man of his character. As she paced to and fro, she shed tears of self-pity ; tears drawn by the bitter conviction, that " the young will to the young," and she was forty-six last birthday !—(Captain Vydon had guessed her age as thirty-four.)—For Niel Conroy to marry a penniless girl, was nothing less than madness, and he was particularly cool-headed, and sane ! Perhaps Jane had been lying ? (she was notorious for her lies). But the widow had the evidence of her own eyes—not to speak of Captain Vydon's. She recalled the Sunday walk ; she remembered seeing the couple together at the ball. If they were not lovers, they were certainly devoted friends.—Then with a violent mental rebound—perhaps all was not lost yet ? A really, resolute, determined woman, with plenty of money, has much in her power. She would put an end to all suspense. With this idea firmly implanted in her mind, Lydia Donovan rang the bell, issued imperative orders, and the following day, made a sudden excursion to Dublin.

CHAPTER XXVI

ALTHOUGH Madame and Doatie had travelled away in the Panhard, in quest of change and excitement, the neighbourhood they deserted, was not without some stirring incidents, and events. In the first place, there was the great run from Bresna to Killconan—the longest and most sensational known for years; the distance was close on twenty miles. Some said, there was “a second fox,” some said he was the “Saturday-to-Monday” pet from Lis-moyle; well reared, and stout-hearted. At the death of this gallant animal, only four followers were up—the first whip, Gabby Moore, Conroy, and a steeplechase jock,—who one and all had swum the Blackwater, leaving the country behind them, strewn with casualties. As the run concluded in an out-of-the-way district,—far from the railway line,—the hounds did not return to their kennels that night; horses, hunters and dogs, were all hospitably entertained at a ramshackle old place, in what is usually known as “the back of beyond.”

After this notable day, came a severe frost, and most

of the hunting-men escaped to Dublin, or London, —there to await a prayed-for thaw.

The cold increased ; there were several heavy snowfalls ; rivers were frozen, and the temperature fell to a lower degree, than within the memory of the oldest inhabitant.—In fact, the icy breezes, carried away the oldest inhabitant, one Bridget Murphy, who lived in a cottage near Doonbeg Station, and was reported to have passed her hundredth birthday.

As the south of Ireland is admittedly the land of mild winters ; the poor, the cattle, and the birds, were the dismayed victims of this Arctic weather. It was, nevertheless, paradoxical as it sounds, the means of a surprising social thaw. Not only did it draw people together from long distances, to skate, to sleigh, to meet round merry tea-tables, and consume hot cakes ; but others of widely-divergent views, assembled in numbers, warmly interested in soup-kitchens, coal funds, and local charities.

This bitter season, afforded a supreme opportunity for Mitty Moore's activities ; her friends—and even her enemies—acknowledged, that she had surpassed all previous records. Bryda for once had ample time to spare, since there was no possibility of gardening or hunting, and the hens had established a sympathetic strike. She and Rhoda went hither and thither among their immediate neighbours, with cans of soup or coffee, warm clothes, newspapers, toys, and tobacco. Their errands were so continuous, that on one occasion Mary at the lodge was moved to exclaim :

"A blessing be on ye both! Wouldn't anyone go forty miles to see ye, and may I be opening the gates of Heaven to the pair of yez."

Among other protégés the birds were not forgotten. Battered old trays, and the lids of boxes were spread with nice hot scraps,—for which a multitude of shivering guests waited among the bushes, or in irregular rows, along the park palings. It was Rhoda's pleasure to attend to this branch of "outdoor relief," to inculcate order, and fair play, and to see that the greedy scald-crows, and shameless sparrows, left something for the robins, thrushes, and blackbirds. Also, to keep a sharp eye on Freddy, who bore the character of being "a very 'mane' dog," and was not above slyly annexing a nice scrap of buttery bread, or a morsel of bacon fat; it was not in the least because he was hungry, but that he grudged such hospitality to starving "outsiders."

The three Miss Moores, the Blakes, Tom Bingham, Mr. Byrne (the local doctor) and his pretty daughter continually assembled at Lismoyle, sat round a big fire, and exchanged experiences, and bulletins from the absentees. Madame,—who was enjoying herself immensely,—vouchsafed an occasional postcard; Mrs. Donovan was still away, so was the Master of the Hounds, and many others.

It was during this Arctic period, that a thrilling experience befell Niel Conroy, which, although not so well known and discussed by the gentry as the wonderful run from Brésna, was the chief topic of conversa-

tion among the people, for many a long day. Niel had driven his aunt and Rhoda over to Kilbeggan, in order to do some shopping, and replenish their supply of magazines, and papers.

It was about half-past four on a bitter December afternoon ; the moon had risen, and they were spanking home at a tremendous pace, along the hard, ironbound road. There was not much snow, except in the ditches, but the whole country (like an enormous Christmas cake) was covered with a white frost. Suddenly the sound of a shot in the still, clear air startled Tom, who instantly broke into a wild gallop. Mrs. Sinclair, elderly and nervous, gave a shrill scream ; but Tom's exuberance was soon under control,—seeing that his master held the reins. Just at the moment they happened to be approaching a large, flat-faced house, situated within a stone's throw of the road—a house which had seen better days, and once been surrounded by a spacious park ; but forty years previously, the public highway had remorselessly cut through this, and destroyed its dignity and seclusion. And there stood the old Georgian mansion, isolated, forlorn, and disconsolate : a farmer rented the land, and recently, a mysterious stranger had occupied the residence. With two or three old servants he lived alone, and appeared somewhat fitfully at church, or at the club in Kilbeggan. There was a vague rumour, that he had been in the East for many years, and returned to end his days in what was once the home of his ancestors.

Wherever he came from, he was evidently a gentleman; had agreeable manners, and a pleasant voice,—but was said to be eccentric. The particular form of his eccentricity was unknown, for his lapses were carefully concealed—thanks to the precaution of three devoted adherents. Mary at the lodge had whispered to Bessie at the Castle, that one evening she had seen Mr. Driscoll go reeling by, with a black bottle stuck in the pocket, where most men carry their handkerchiefs; but as he was kind and good to the poor, the two women agreed to hold their tongues.

Just as the Lismoyle car was passing the gate of Witchwood, a distracted, bare-headed, man, darted out, shouting:

“Stop, Captain, stop! for the love of God, and come in here this minute!”

“What’s the matter?” inquired Conroy, with great difficulty pulling up the excited, and homeward-bound, Tom.

“It’s Mr. Driscoll, sir. Faix, it must all come out *now*! He’s gone tearing and teetotally mad with the whisky. He’s been drinking heavy for the last few weeks, and now he’s rightly out of his senses, and he’s away up the field, with a loaded gun, and cartridges.”

“Perhaps he means no harm,” suggested Conroy—
“and is only potting hares or rabbits.”

“Is it hares and rabbits! He’s after shooting Murphy’s fine young heifer, his collie-dog, and three

or four sheep; now he's making down towards the bog, roaring and cursing and carrying on like a lion. And not one of us dar go near him. But for you, sir, being a soldier, and used to bloody work, it's different of course—and I was in great luck to catch you going by."

"All right," replied the soldier, promptly accepting the challenge. "Send someone to hold the horse, and I'll be with you in half a second. I expect I'll be able to tackle him."

Mrs. Sinclair put a firm, restraining hand on her nephew's knee, and said:

"No, *no*, Niel; I cannot allow you to run such a risk; drive on. Just think of it, a madman with a loaded gun—and you unarmed!"

"Don't be frightened, Aunt Grace; I've had a job like this before, with a native who ran amok in Peshawar. The chances are, that Driscoll can't hit a haystack."

"He has managed to kill a dog," put in Rhoda, and there was a quiver in her voice.

He surveyed her for a second with a pair of searching, fearless eyes, then threw the reins to the youth, who took charge of Tom, jumped down; and in another moment was out of sight.

For some time his aunt and Rhoda, remained staring at one another, in a condition of paralysed silence. Was this horror really happening? or was the whole scene, merely a dream and a nightmare? At last Mrs. Sinclair said:

"Let us get out, and go into the house. Niel may be some time away."

Together they walked up to the hall door, which stood wide: here an elderly woman met them on the threshold; she was in floods of tears.

"Oh, come in, come in, ladies!" she gasped, drying her eyes with her apron, and motioning them into a large, low sitting-room, with very early Victorian furniture. "There's no one in it but me; they are all away up the hill, and over the bog after him, this half-hour."

"Are you Mr. Driscoll's housekeeper?" inquired Mrs. Sinclair, as she seated herself on a hard horse-hair sofa—that was nearly double her own age.

"Yes, ma'am," she said, "I am. My husband and I have been with him this good few years, and a better master, we could not find. He was out in India for a long time, and got a stroke of the sun, and a grand pension. He's had trouble too: when he has drink taken, he goes crazy. A couple of glasses sets him off, and then there's no stopping him: a bottle of whisky a day,—or maybe more. Some gives out it's our soft, easy-going climate that starts the craving; but in his case, I make sure it was the sun that weakened him. When he has a heavy turn, we try to keep him within, and lock up his clothes; but last night he got altogether beyond us, and only for Patsy Cassidy that drives the milk-cart, he'd have thrown me out of the landing window! I've it in my mind that he'll kill someone *this* time, and God send," turning to

Rhoda with a dramatic gesture, "that it's not your young gentleman!"

Rhoda was too stricken to repudiate the woman's suggestion, or even to speak; for her the world had suddenly darkened.

"Faix, Conroy is the bouldest man in these parts," resumed the housekeeper, "and I'm thankful he happened to be going by. When Mr. Driscoll has one of these cruel attacks, and starts round the place with a gun or a scythe, I needn't tell you, that everyone runs like hares."

The low drawing-room, with its deep, narrow windows,—which had probably not been open for years,—its close atmosphere of mould and soot, was altogether too much for Rhoda. She felt that if she remained much longer, she would certainly faint. Rising, and whispering a few words to Mrs. Sinclair, she went out noiselessly; suspense was agonizing! It was better to know the worst. She stood for a moment on the doorstep, eagerly imbibing the refreshing, frosty air. A winter sunset had faded, the moon rode high, and invested the scene, with a sort of ghostly beauty. There was not a sound to be heard, but the impatient stamping of Tom, and the jingling of his harness. As Rhoda crossed the yard, and a derelict shrubbery—the abode of roosting poultry—there was the report of a shot—another, followed by loud, hoarse shouts. Her heart stood still; the stricken girl leaned against a gatepost, covering her face, as she realized, that if Niel

Conroy met his death at the hands of this lunatic, life had no further joy for her.

By and by, with a sort of frantic, desperate, effort, she pulled herself together, and climbed a steep boreen, which led into a high pasture,—the remains of the old demesne. Here, also, she came upon the remains of the madman's victims—a heifer, a collie, and three sheep. With a hasty, nervous glance, she hurried past them, and reached the top of the hill.

Directly below lay the bog, so-called ; but it was really an expanse of short grass,—at present white with frost,—dotted with clumps of furze bushes. Rising out of it at some distance, was a large plantation of fir trees, surrounded by a deep ditch. As Rhoda stood looking anxiously about, she noticed various scattered and crouching figures among the furze ; probably these—like Agamemnon—had elected “to stand afar off, and bid the valiant die !”—The valiant, in this instance, being represented by Niel Conroy.

She ran down to the bottom of a hill, scrambled up a bank, and holding on by a tree, became an immediate spectator of the scene of action. At the moment, there were, so to speak, no principal performers on the stage,—merely the skulking “supers” among the furze bushes,—and only the cry of wheeling curlews broke the spell of a chilling silence.

At last, a running figure dashed from the plantation,—a man in a floating dressing-gown, with a cartridge-belt over his shoulder and a gun in his hand. The

sharp, clear radiance of moonlight, lay over the whole country, and made the scene as clearly distinct, as if it were taking place in broad daylight. The escaped lunatic, was closely followed by Niel, who leaped out of the grove, in his wake.

When he was within about a hundred yards, Driscoll turned, and fired point-blank at his pursuer; apparently he missed, for before he had time to reload, he had been overtaken, overpowered, and his weapon wrenched from him.

And now the crowd, who had been taking cover in all directions, came swarming round captive, and captor. The captive made a frenzied and sustained resistance; his strength seemed "as the strength of ten," and almost superhuman; but eventually his hands were tied behind his back, and, foaming and shrieking, he was marched away under a strong escort.

As the little procession passed the bank on which Rhoda had taken her stand, Niel looked up, and for the first time, was aware of her presence.

"So—you've secured him!" she stammered; the words seemed to choke in her throat.

"Yes, it's all right!" he answered, "it was an exciting chase—but I ran him to ground in the plantation. Come along," he added, holding out his hand, to help her to descend from the bank. But why was she so strangely agitated? Why so ghastly? How she was trembling! and in the moonlight, he noticed that her eyes were bright with tears. What Conroy gathered from her white,

drawn countenance, and the agonized tension of her look—made his pulses run fire! It was impossible for a girl, who did not care for a fellow, to wear such a face of haggard tragedy. The unexpected discovery so stunned him, that for a moment he was unable to speak. In dead silence, the two fell in behind the crowd and the captive—somewhat after the manner of mourners at a funeral,—though the heart of one, leapt giddily with joy.

“Begob, and isn’t the Captain a great fellow!” exclaimed a man who was walking in front of them. “It’s the real old Irish blood, that isn’t afraid of the devil himself. Faix, it wasn’t everyone who would have set a foot in that dark wood, well knowing there was a madman lying in wait with a loaded gun. Oh, them Conroys have a hot drop!”

“Ay, and it’s proud we are to own you, Niel,” chimed in another, dropping back to join him. “May you live fifty years longer than was intended for you.”

“And the lady to keep ye company!” gallantly supplemented a third.

Conroy turned round with a quick air of command, said something in Irish, and the speech was immediately followed by a respectful silence.

“I think I’ll run on and tell Mrs. Sinclair,” volunteered Rhoda, who shrank from overhearing any further personal remarks; and in advance of the crowd, she hurried down the lane and into the house, where she discovered Mrs. Sinclair, still sitting on the horsehair sofa, and still dissolved in tears.

As soon as she had realized the good news, she dried her eyes and warmly embraced the messenger ; then, examining her closely, she exclaimed :

" But, Rhoda, my dear child ! You're as white as twenty ghosts. You must have felt the strain nearly as much as I did ? "

Before the " dear child " could invent any reply, there was the sound of yells, expostulating voices, and trampling feet, and the housekeeper ran out to receive her distraught master. But on this occasion his condition was entirely beyond her amateur ministrations ; he was a violent, raving, madman. Niel volunteered to fetch a doctor,—having first deposited the ladies at Lismoyle,—and the trio drove off amid loud cheers (by no means to the taste of Tom), whilst four able-bodied men carried Mr. Driscoll to his apartment.

The contents of the tub-car continued their interrupted drive in almost total silence,—each occupied with their own thoughts. Rhoda was miserable and unhinged. Here was no longer the self-possessed, unembarrassed young lady of Grosvenor Street, but one whose heart-strings had recently been most cruelly wrung. Moreover, she was overwhelmed by the conviction, that she had " given herself away." What must Niel and his aunt think of her ? Would another young woman, who was no relation, but a mere outsider, have pursued Niel to the scene of danger, trembled at his daring, and wept openly at his escape ?

Conroy, on the other hand, was in the seventh

heaven! To gain such a joy as his recent discovery, he would gladly have faced ten armed lunatics. Hitherto, as he was poor and ineligible, he had put a tremendous restraint on his own feelings; but now, he made up his mind to speak, and as they sped along, a strange light shone in his eyes, as if he saw, some happy vision!

"My dear boy," said his aunt, "that *was* a dangerous undertaking! Thank God it's all right; but I'm all upset, and too old for these sensations. You can just drop us at the gate, and we will walk up."

"Yes," he agreed. "Driscoll is in a pretty bad way, and if the doctor is in, I will take him back with me."

"All's well that ends well, but what an *awful* half-hour you have given me!" As Mrs. Sinclair spoke, she laid her hand upon her nephew's arm. "But what's this!" she exclaimed, drawing back. "Why, your sleeve is wet. Oh!" looking over at Rhoda, "I believe it's *blood*!"

"It's nothing at all," he protested with energy. "Now, Aunt Grace, don't be getting into a fuss! When that fellow fired, his bullet just grazed the top of my shoulder. I suppose it has bled a bit, and that's all. It'll do me good."

"No, Niel," said his aunt. "Don't I know you of old, as a little boy, and the awful cuts, and bruises you hid, for fear of not being taken out to shoot or ride,—and how ashamed you felt, when you were ill. I expect you have had a nasty wound.

I wish I could see it. You know I've done 'First Aid.' "

" You don't want me to undress here in the car before Miss Kyle, do you ? As I'm going straight to Byrne's, I will get him to put a bit of lint on it, and I declare to you, upon my solemn word of honour, that it's nothing. And here we are," as he drew up beside the gate of Lismoyle.

" Of course I shall have to take the doctor over to Witchwood, and drive him home, so don't expect me till you see me. I daresay for once Tom and I, may have to go without our dinner," and raising his cap, he drove away at a gallop.

CHAPTER XXVII

THERE was no sign of Niel that night; no, not even when the house was closed, and all its inmates had retired to bed. But Rhoda, as she lay awake, heard him stealthily creeping upstairs—in what must have been the small hours of the morning.

The consequence of such prolonged watchfulness was, that she overslept herself, and, as a consequence, breakfasted alone. Afterwards, she sallied forth in snow-boots and furs, to see how the frost had treated the greenhouse? She was busy with scissors and watering-pot, when she heard footsteps approaching, and saw Niel coming down the garden, with his arm in a sling.

“Good-morning,” he began, as he opened the door.

“And so your arm *was* hurt!” was her reply.

“Oh, nothing much. Our modern bullet does not lodge.”

“Bullet!” she exclaimed.

“Yes, it wasn’t a shot-gun he had, worse luck! Still, I was fortunate; only just knocked out of time for a moment;—it went bang through a muscle—and I’m not a ha’porth the worse! But as this arm is useful for riding, I’m just nursing it up a bit, for a

couple of days. We had an awful night with Driscoll. He is a homicidal maniac, and they've taken him off to the County Asylum, poor chap!"

"Poor chap!" echoed the girl indignantly. "When he nearly murdered you!"

"Oh, but he wasn't accountable, and didn't know what he was doing." Then all of a sudden his voice dropped, and seemed to grow husky, as he added: "Look here, Rhoda,—I've something to say to you, and I'm blest, if I know how to begin!"

Rhoda put down the watering-pot. She had suddenly become very pale.

"I've always been in love with you," was his abrupt announcement. "Yes, ever since the day you first came. But as I'm such a pauper, I kept out of your way, and held my tongue, for I had no reason to suppose that you,—who had seen so much of the world,—could find anything to care for, in a poor devil like me; and on my part, I felt that it was a madness, that must be smothered. But last night, when we had all this bother, and you followed me down the lane, and I saw you looking so scared and white, I said to myself, 'This is a most encouraging incident—and I'll take my chance!'"

"Oh, Niel," she faltered. Rhoda's colour had returned; for once she looked beautiful!

"Do you care a little bit for me? or—am I—a presumptuous fool?" and he gripped both her hands.

"Yes," she whispered.—"No, no"—eagerly.—"I mean, I *do* care!"

"Bless you, darling! You know how poor I am,—but you're in the same boat yourself. We shall rub along, if I can only pay off the mortgage—and get my hands free."

"Oh, yes," she assented emphatically. "Of course, —*of course*, you will pay off the mortgage."

"I'm not so sure, and your rich aunt may think I have taken a mean advantage of the situation—will she?"

"No, indeed—not when she comes to know you, Niel."

"There's a real pretty speech! and it is I, that should be making them," and releasing her hands, he took her in his arms, and kissed her.

Presently he went out, and brought in another garden-chair, and they sat together hand in hand, and talked; going back to their very first meeting, and imparting their impressions of one another—after the manner of lovers.

"I'm afraid it will have to be a long engagement, Rhoda, but one thing may clear our way. I believe Madame has made a conquest of the great Pedro Brander."

"What! Aunt Kathleen. Oh, nonsense! How ridiculous!" and her incredulous niece, burst into a peal of laughter.

"I sincerely hope it's a solemn reality," said Niel. "Madame is still astonishingly good-looking; and there's her voice, which is extraordinarily seductive—the voice of the charmer, eh?"

"Yes; and Mr. Brander has never seen the funny side of her character."

"Oh, *he* won't mind that! He's a rich man. To think of your aunt cutting out all our girls, and carrying off the great *parti* for her third—and let us hope last—husband. What will people say?"

"And what will some people say when they hear about *us*—Niel?" she paused significantly, and looked at him with troubled eyes.

"Yes," and for a moment he was silent. At last he muttered, almost as if he were talking to himself:

"Of course, money is a temptation; especially to a fellow situated as I am. But if I were to marry a woman for her fortune,—I'd never hold up my head again—*never!*"

"So, then, you wouldn't marry a rich girl—even if you loved her?" inquired his fiancée; the question was accompanied by a rather shaky smile.

"My dear Rhoda, no rich girl would look at *me!* You and I will be nice and poor; but when Madame is settled, I am relieved of her jointure, and if some of my young 'uns turn out fairly well, we shall begin to see daylight. Bryda will live with us for a time—I know you won't mind."

"Surely you need not ask!"

"Here she comes with Pekoe, and we had better break it to them both. Bryda, come here," he said, rising to open the door, "I want to show you something."

"You don't mean to say," she said, entering, "that the vine has been nipped by the frost!"

"No, not that I know of. I want to present you to your sister, that is to be."

"Oh, Rhoda! oh, Niel!" She hastily put down Pekoe, and hugged them rapturously, one after another. "I was sure of you, Niel—although you *are* so dark! but I never knew what to make of Rhoda. She is always rather subtle, and *close*. Oh, I *am* pleased, and delighted. Look, look, Pekoe, there is your new missus—he always took to you, Rhoda, from the very first—clairvoyant little Chinaman! And so you have made it up in the greenhouse, of all places!"

"Why not? *we* have no reason to be afraid of glass houses," replied her brother.

"Of course we will tell Aunt Grace, and Bessie, and Martin," he continued; "but I think we had better keep the matter to ourselves. Just let us have a few days' start. As soon as the frost goes, they will all be back, every man-jack."

"Then there is Aunt Char," said Rhoda, speaking for the first time. "She is now in Hong Kong. I should like to cable to her at once."

"So you shall," said Niel. "We will concoct a plausible message, and I will drive you over to Kilbeggan after lunch, and you can send it off yourself. I expect it will take some doing—this cable! Shall we go into the house, and make it up now?"

Before long they were both seated by the fire in the

smoking-room, puzzling over a sheet of paper, endeavouring to impart a great deal of information within rather narrow limits. At last it was finished, and submitted to Bryda,—who reproached her future sister-in-law, for reckless extravagance.

"Why, it's nearly as long as an ordinary note," she expostulated, "and will cost you at least three pounds."

"Never mind, my economical Bryda, it will be money well invested. For once in a way, I intend to be extravagant. We will take this over to Kilbeggan after lunch, and you shall come with us."

"No, I certainly will *not*," declared Bryda, "but do as I would be done by. But let me warn you of one thing,—if Tom Bingham meets you two dashing about the country by yourselves, and with only Pekoe as chaperon,—the news will be all over the place before night."

"Tom Bingham has gone to Dublin," said Niel. "Anyhow, he talked of it, when I met him a couple of days ago. Some law business is taking him up there."

"For law business, read 'Lyddy Donovan,'" rejoined his sister. "He will just run up in order to keep an eye upon her."

As the newly-engaged pair drove off, with Black Monday in the dog-cart, they made a remarkably handsome, happy-looking trio. Black Monday was wild with high spirits; he had not been out of his stable for days, and the seven miles to Kilbeggan,

were accomplished in an extraordinarily short time. The cable was despatched, after considerable delay, as the young lady in the post office was somewhat dubious about a message to "Hong Kong": suggested "Jericho," and hinted that "*she* had no time for practical jokes!" But in the end, she was persuaded, that Captain Conroy and his companion, were really serious.

Having accomplished their errand, the messengers returned, meeting various adventures, and being nearly upset by Black Monday's antics, and sudden and uncalled-for terror of pigs and goats; however, they arrived home safely, and in time for tea. Champagne was produced at dinner, and Mrs. Sinclair, with much emotion, proposed the health of Niel and Rhoda. Martin, from the sideboard, was also invited to take part in this little ceremony.

To Rhoda, it was the most delightful evening of her whole life. She felt superbly and unaffectedly happy; no longer a girl at a loose end,—with no particular belongings. For the future, she belonged to Niel, and he to her. Her mind was so full of glorious hopes and plans and wishes, that for hours, she could not, and would not sleep.

The next morning, the door of her bedroom opened, and Rhoda, who was doing her hair, turned round to discover Bryda in floods of tears, with a letter in her hand.

"What is the matter? Not bad news from India?" she asked, rising and rushing towards her.

"No, not that, but bad enough! It's a letter from Niel's solicitors, who manage his business, to say that the man who holds the mortgage on Lismoyle has given notice to foreclose in three months. We shall never be able to find the money—what *are* we to do?" and Bryda, who had been attempting to smother her sobs, suddenly broke down completely.

"Oh, something will happen," said Rhoda reassuringly. "It will never come to that. Where is Niel?"

"He has just started for Dublin. He had his bag packed, ordered the dog-cart, and drove away about five minutes ago, hoping to catch the early train. He told me to show you the letter, and to give you his love—to tell you that he was going to try and do his best for all of us, and that he would write to you every day. He may get back to-morrow—and he may have to remain a week."

The bad news, as usual, flew swiftly, and was not long in reaching the ear of Mrs. Sinclair, who was sorely troubled, and wept. As soon as she had recovered from the first shock, she insisted on the girls having breakfast; for, as she sagely remarked: "It's no use in making matters worse, and having you two in the doctor's hands!"

When they sat round the table, making a show of eating, she continued:

"I've always had a foreboding that something like this would happen. What with the interest on the mortgages, the large jointure, and old debts—I wonder

how Niel has managed to hold on so long. He has made a brave struggle, poor fellow ! ”

“ He has,” agreed Bryda ; “ and the death of the Galtee More colt, and an overlooked debt of six hundred pounds, put him back terribly this year.”

“ And I suppose the firm or the individual who holds the mortgages, feared that the interest might fail. Probably they heard of Niel’s losses, and of course people have to look after themselves. Unfortunately I am powerless. Nearly all I possess is my pension.”

“ And I——” began Rhoda.

“ Oh, yes, my dear. Of course I know,” interrupted Bryda, “ and we will take the will for the deed.”

“ Well, every cloud has a silver lining,” continued her aunt. “ You will return to me, till Jack is in a position to claim you.”

“ Yes, but what about Niel and Rhoda ? Their prospects are blue indeed. However, there are lots of things of value in the house ; of course we shall turn them into money, and they may bring in far more than we would suppose.”

“ It will take many articles of value to make up nine thousand pounds,” said Mrs. Sinclair.

“ Yes, but people who have looked round the drawing-room, have pointed out china and old lacquer, which they declared was almost priceless.”

“ Oh, my dear, I know ! That’s the way with one’s friends, when they want to flatter you. But a cold-blooded expert, will tell a *very* different tale.”

“ Well,” replied Bryda, “ if I had my way, I’d sell

everything, and strip the house of even the chimney-pieces, and mahogany doors. Anything to scrape up money, and keep Lismoyle."

Her future sister-in-law, who had been listening in a sort of uneasy silence, now interposed :

"For goodness' sake, Bry, leave us the doors this bitter weather! For my part, I have a presentiment that everything will come out all right,—so don't take too strong measures just yet," and with an emphatic nod, she went out of the room, and flew upstairs, in order to write her first love-letter.

CHAPTER XXVIII

WHEN Conroy arrived at Doonbeg Station, the first person he encountered was Tom Bingham, clothed in an imposing fur coat, fur gloves and fur cap. In answer to his friend's jeering exclamation, he clapped his hairy paws, and declared that "he was bound to take care of himself, as good people were scarce"; and added: "You could do with a bit more on, this perishing day, my son!"

"Oh, I'm all right. I have a poshteen at home, but I didn't like to wear it, for fear people might suppose I was in fancy dress!"

The Dublin train was late, and as the two men briskly paced the platform in order to keep themselves warm, Tom Bingham exhibited a certain amount of curiosity to know, what was taking Conroy up to Dublin at such an early hour? He burrowed so deeply for motives, and his questions were so clever and insidious, that his companion was reluctantly compelled to tell him the truth.

"Good Lord! you don't say so!" he exclaimed, coming to a sudden halt. "Well, I can't make it

out. You are paying the interest—five per cent.—to the hour; and whoever he is, he can't better that in these times. You are right to see into things yourself. There's some hanky-panky work behind, and that's as sure as my name is Thomas Bingham. I have law business on hand too. An old aunt of mine died lately, and I'm trustee. Who's your solicitor?"

"Soames. The firm has always done our family business."

"Soames. Oh, he's fifty years' too old! You should go to a modern firm, or to a man who has a sharp young partner; you have to be very much on the spot nowadays. Hullo! here's our train at last. Come along, and look out for a first-class smoker."

"Oh, I'm going third," said Conroy.

"*What!*" shouted Bingham. "This bitter cold day?"

"Needs must, when the devil drives!"

"And I wonder who the devil, the mortgagee *is*?" said the other, with his hand on the handle of the smoking-carriage door. "Well, I suppose I'll see you in town. I shall be at the 'Hibernian,' and I'll stay up for the Cattle Show. Lyddy is at the 'Shelbourne.' I'll tell her you're in town.—A line to the club will find you, eh?"

"No, no, Tom," rejoined Conroy emphatically. "For God's sake don't give me away!" and with a wave of his hand, he disappeared into a third-class compartment.

For a whole week, Conroy incessantly struggled

with legal business ; the foreclosing clause proved to be correct. Three months' notice as was stated—when it should have been at least one year. He and old Soames laid their heads together, and endeavoured to shake the decision of Murphy & Co.'s client, but no grace was to be obtained. On the contrary, he clamoured for his capital,—for which he stated he had an immediate use. Worse than this, it was impossible—times being bad—to raise another mortgage. Land as an investment was out of fashion ; there was no demand. Old Irish family places were drugs on the market. As for the Conroy property, everyone knew, that for years it had been neglected, and starved. There was no help for it. Lismoyle must go. The sale of the furniture, stock and horses might bring in—say at most—three thousand pounds. For when an auction is, so to speak, forced, everyone knows the heart-breaking sacrifices, that subsequently justify the purchasers' proud boasting ! In the lowest spirits, and the very blackest depression, Conroy—as advised by his lawyer—sought a well-known auctioneer, and an expert in the matter of antiquities.

He walked round the great show-rooms, accompanied by a little grey-haired man in a skull-cap, describing to him in lame and inefficient terms, some of the contents of his home.

“ Of late we have been rather overdone with Irish sales,” said the proprietor, “ and have more stock just now than we know how to deal with. So many families have smashed, and sold off. Look at this,” and he

pointed to a splendid cabinet exhibiting a large ticket on which was printed: "Bought at Sir Edward Monaghan's Sale." Then he indicated a row of Chippendale chairs bearing the same name. "Here," pointing to some pictures, "these came out of Lord Garrow's old place," and sure enough there was the placard, "Purchased at Lord Garrow's Sale." So also were some heavy old gilt-mounted sofas, Sheffield plate, and sets of Crown Derby, and Spode.

In his mind's eye Niel already beheld a collection bearing a large ticket, on which was printed "Bought at the Auction at Lismoyle."

"I think some of our things are quite as good as these," he ventured. "We have some fine old Irish silver."

His companion pricked up his ears, and said:

"That sort of stuff, if it's genuine,—always goes."

"And there's a lot of French furniture my great-grandfather bought in Paris."

"Empire?"

"Yes, and in fairly good condition."

"Any pictures?" the expert inquired.

"Yes. I don't know that the paintings are up to much, but we've lots of coloured prints, and pastilles."

"Oh, then, I'll send a man down to value, and report," said the dealer, scenting a lucrative affair.

"All right. The sooner he can come the better."

"In two or three days—will that suit you, sir? And can you put him up?"

"Yes, certainly. I expect the inventory will take a little time."

At this moment, a tall, square figure in furs, darkened the doorway, and a full, throaty voice was heard to say :

"There's a little silver figure in the window,"—then with a note of delighted recognition. "Oh, Niel!" advancing eagerly. "Fancy seeing you here, of all the people in the world. When did you come up?"

"A few days ago."

"And you have never been near me. What a shame!"

"I've been awfully busy about a lot of things."

"Yes, of course. Your Christmas-boxes. What are you buying here? Shall I come and help you to choose?"

Mrs. Donovan gazed up at him searchingly. What was the matter? Niel did not look like himself.

"What are you buying?" she persisted, glancing round.

"I'm not buying," he answered curtly, "I'm *selling*."

"Nonsense!"

"I wish it *was* nonsense." And he moved towards the door, as if anxious to effect his escape. Then, turning to the proprietor, he said: "Here's my card. If you will drop me a line, I'll send over to meet your valuator. Our station is Doonbeg."

"Very well, sir, thank you. Early next week."

"So then," said Mrs. Donovan, joining him in the doorway. "It's really serious? I thought you looked put out about something. Do walk back with me to the hotel, and tell me all about it!"

"I'm sorry I can't. I have to meet a fellow at the Kildare Street Club at five. I think he's going to buy a couple of my young horses,—and I hope to do a deal."

"Well, come and dine? Now, you really *must*! You look fagged out. I'll order a nice little dinner; that will cheer you up, and you shall name your own time. You know, you have to eat somewhere, so don't disappoint me, for your life!"

"All right, then, thank you. I'll come at eight o'clock. Shall I get you a car?"

"Is it to walk up Grafton Street?" she protested. "No, indeed, I like exercise. Well," as he took off his hat, "ta-ta—we meet again."

* * * * *

Mrs. Donovan sat over the fire in her bedroom, and sipped tea meditatively. Her eyes were fixed on the coals, her mind was unusually occupied. By and by, she got up and walked restlessly about the apartment. Moved by a sudden impulse, she sought out her "patience" box, deftly shuffled and cut the cards; she turned up, oh happy omen!—the ace of hearts! Later, she sent down for, and studied the menu, and wine-list; subsequently she made a careful toilette, selecting a black gown, as Niel always liked her in black—(her own tastes were

for gay colours),—and her finest diamonds ; the result of her exertions was successful. Her complexion was brilliant, her eyes sparkled, her hair had “ gone ” beautifully. No, she didn’t look a day over thirty-five, she assured herself, as taking up fan and furs, the wealthy widow descended to the lounge, where she awaited her guest.

Niel Conroy was punctual. He looked remarkably handsome and well groomed, and certainly did Mrs. Donovan credit as an escort, when through a crowded dining-room they made their way to their own particular reserved table. Not very far from them, was a large and lively party, which included Mr. Pedro Brander, Madame, in smart black and white, conspicuously happy and vivacious, Doatie (also, let us hope, happy), with a young man, on either side of her.

Madame rose, and with her usual impulsiveness, came swimming towards them, serviette in hand.

“ What a sight for sore eyes ! ” she exclaimed. “ Fancy you two dear people, hobnobbing together like this. Niel, what has brought you up ? ”

“ Business,” he answered, with a certain abruptness.

“ And I’m here for pleasure—as you may see. How are they all at home ? How is the peacock ? ”

“ Quite well, and also, as far as I know, the peahen, too.”

“ We are dining with the Don—that’s what we call him, and he has been teaching us ‘ Monte ’ and ‘ La Tuba ’ and how to play the guitar ! Oh, we have had *such* fun ! Well, I must run back to my little

party. I'll see you again later. *Au revoir!*" and she glided away, followed by many eyes.

"I should say it was a settled thing!" observed Mrs. Donovan between two spoonfuls of soup. "Kitsey has lassoed Pedro Brander,—and he is completing her education!"

"Do you think so? Are you serious—bar humbug?"

"Yes. They are always together. At the rink, the theatre and, above all, in the *shops*. It would be a fine thing for you, Niel," and his hostess looked at him affectionately.

"And for *her*?" he supplemented.

"Of course! She will live in a palace at Buenos Ayres, and no doubt get Doatie off her hands at last. Those wealthy Argentines will admire her complexion and hair,—and her temper will meet its match."

During dinner, neither Mrs. Donovan nor her friend, touched upon the topic that was uppermost in their minds, but discussed the frost, the local news, and their fellow guests.

"I've seen a good deal of Captain Vydon," announced the lady. "In fact, he lunched with me to-day. When the thaw comes, I'll have him down for a week's hunting."

"Oh, will you? Tom Bingham is in town."

"Yes, he lunched here too, and was so odious; just in one of his nasty tempers. He nearly snapped the head off poor Vydon."

"Pity he didn't. He's such a thundering ass!"

"Oh, come, come, Niel!" with a playful tap of her fan. "Anyway, you cannot deny his good looks. *Why* are all you men so jealous? I say, I vote we make a move, or we won't get nice seats in the lounge. Do come along," and gathering up her gloves, she sailed forth.

Presently, thanks to a friendly waiter, the couple found themselves seated at a little table discreetly aloof. As soon as they had finished coffee and their cigarettes, Mrs. Donovan leaned over, and said, persuasively:

"Now, Niel, tell me *all* about it. Why are you selling family heirlooms?—why do you look so wretched?"

"Well, then, Lyddy, I will tell you, and as an old friend, I *know* you will be sorry! The fellow who holds the mortgage, has given notice to foreclose in three months; and I haven't got the coin to pay him off. So there it is!"

"But can't you find the money elsewhere?" gazing fixedly at the opposite wall, as she put the question.

"No. I've been trying hard all this week, telephoning, writing, wiring, and interviewing till I'm sick of it. It's no use, and as I don't intend to make two bites of a cherry, I shall auction off every stick. Even then, whatever the sale brings in, won't go far." Then he added, with a queer gulp in his voice: "They must take the place!"

"And you, Niel?" and she gave him a quick look. "What will you do?"

For a moment he did not answer, but stared down at the carpet, and a spasm of pain convulsed his lips. At length he said :

" I expect there will be something for Bryda out of the wreck, and she can marry Massey. As for me——"

" Yes ? " leaning towards him over the little marble table. " As for you ? " repeated his companion, with a catch in her breath.

" Oh, I shall get some sort of billet, perhaps in the Indian Remounts, or as a planter's assistant. One thing is certain—I'll never come back to Ireland."

" Oh, Niel, don't say that ! You'll break my heart," she protested passionately. " Listen ! I, too, love Lismoyle. I'd a million times rather live there than at Rahan. Now, *don't* interrupt. Just let me speak," and as she laid her hand on his, he seemed to feel the racing of her pulse. " Let *me* redeem the place, let me restore it to its former state. Give me that honour ? You can keep the hounds if you like, and a couple of horses at the Curragh. I know I'm older than you, my dear, dear, boy—but my heart is young."

She paused to draw a long, tremulous breath, and gripped his hand, with the clutch of the drowning.

For a moment Conroy felt stunned and speechless—almost as if an avalanche had descended on him. Then, as he recovered from the shock, and looked straight into Lyddy's burning eyes, in his, she

already read his answer,—and her doom. At last he stammered out :

“ You are more than generous, Lyddy. But what you offer is impossible . . . for me to . . . accept. I could not—— No—no. You have my most heartfelt——”

“ So here you are ! ” cried Madame (her interruption was the only boon, she had ever conferred on her step-son). “ We have been hunting for you everywhere. Oh, how sly and clever of you and Lyddy, to find this delicious nook. Old hands, eh ? I suppose you have been discussing the affairs of the nation. And here is Pedro,” she added, with quivering triumph, as Mr. Brander came forward, large, handsome, and beaming, and held out a broad hand to Niel, as he said :

“ Yes, it's Pedro and Kitty now ! You know what that means, eh ? Hullo,” suddenly looking round, “ what's become of Mrs. Donovan ? ”

CHAPTER XXIX

THE long-hoped-for thaw had arrived at last, and hunting folk were returning to Kilbeggan like so many homing pigeons. Among these, were the M.F.H. and his wife, Mrs. Donovan with her guests, and many others. Niel Conroy, who happened to travel by the same train—as there was now no object in studying small economies—found himself in a crowded first-class smoking carriage, along with Captain Vydon, Tom Bingham, and several acquaintances. They were all more or less cheery and talkative, but there was nothing particularly cheery or talkative about Conroy, who sat in the farthest corner of the compartment, absorbed in a newspaper, and obviously disinclined for conversation,—yes, amazing to relate, even when the topic was racing! He was therefore abandoned to his own devices. As the train thundered through Kildare and the Queen's County, the recluse behind the *Field* was not really reading; he was thinking of the forthcoming auction, of Rhoda, and himself; their prospects were black indeed! It was true that she would make an admirable poor

man's wife, but there were poor men—and poor men ! and if Lismoyle passed away, as it was bound to do, he had no longer a home to offer her. His gloomy meditations were suddenly interrupted by Captain Vydon, who, leaning across, gave him a familiar smack on the knee, and said :

" I say, Conroy, you seem a bit down on your luck ! How's the little heiress ? "

" What heiress ? " he inquired stiffly.

" Why, the only one in your part of the world. Your step-mother's niece—Miss Kyle."

" I haven't a notion what you're talking about ! "

Captain Vydon bent still further forward, and, looking into the other's face, with his glittering black eyes, said :

" Now, come, my dear fellow, what's the use of playing the ostrich trick ? You know as well as I do, that the girl has pots of money ! "

" I have no information about Miss Kyle's money affairs—and I see no reason why we should discuss them," rejoined Conroy.

" Her money affairs are nothing to me, worse luck ! " declared Vydon. " But I've known her for a good few years, and I can tell you this—that girl has refused Lord Finsbury over and over again—not to mention a lot of other fellows. And when she comes of age, in a few months' time, she will have a nice little fortune of ten thousand a year. I think she's a bit eccentric ; it's not *all*—Jam ! " and he looked disagreeably knowing.

"What's that you're saying?" inquired Tom Bingham, pricking up his ears; "that Miss Kyle will have a fortune of ten thousand a year! Why did I not know this before? Is it a fact?"

"You can see her grandfather's will in the Doctors' Commons for one shilling. Cheer up, Bingham! By all accounts, the young lady is still in the market."

"I don't know what the manners and customs may be in your part of the world, Captain Vydon," said Niel, surveying him with a pair of smouldering eyes, "but over here, we don't discuss a lady's money affairs, and love affairs, in public vehicles; and I must ask you to leave Miss Kyle's name out of the conversation. In fact," he continued in a voice as cool and level as if he were merely saying "How do you do?" "if you utter another word about her, I will pitch you out of the window!" Then, as if he considered the subject closed, he deliberately unfolded another paper, and retired behind it, with his own thoughts.

On hearing this threat, Captain Vydon's face, which was naturally sallow, assumed the colour of an omelette. He gathered himself together, as if prepared to spring at Conroy, and with a blasphemous oath, half rose from his seat. But Tom Bingham, in mortal terror of a scene of bloodshed, forcibly thrust him back, and made a quick, pantomimic sign, as much as to intimate, that Conroy was the worse for *drink*,—then hastily burst into a general conversation on the absorbing subject of horse-dealing—yes,

precisely as if nothing uncommon had occurred ; and it was quite an every-day affair, for one passenger to eject another !

His loud, incessant talk, and stormy ejaculations, completely drowned Vydon's deep mutterings, and furious imprecations. When at last the train dawdled into Doonbeg, diplomatic Tom, thankful for the darkness made visible by one dim lamp, hurled Vydon out of the carriage, and thrust him into the middle of Mrs. Donovan's lively party on the platform ; for he knew, that if he and Conroy came face to face, there was bound to be a shindy. Niel was a boxer, and the clean-cut lines of his figure, and the excellence of his proportions, were in striking contrast to the weedy frame of the man about town. With profound relief, Tom watched his friend hurry out to his dog-cart, and drive off into the black, tempestuous night, little suspecting that the fiery young man, was bound for yet another battlefield !

The thaw had brought with it torrents of rain, and between rain and melting snow, the roads from Doonbeg were in a terrible condition, the mud splashing up to the wheels of the dog-cart, as Conroy, with torment in his heart, and the north wind beating in his face, drove home as fast as Black Monday could lay leg to ground.

There was a splendid fire in the drawing-room at Lismoyle, composed of wood and turf, and luxuriously extended in front of it lay Freddy and Pekoe,—their waistcoats distinctly muddy. Had Madame been at

home, they would have been ruthlessly "shooed" out. Near by on the sofa Rhoda was sitting, with cushions piled behind her, and her feet up. Three days previously she had sprained her ankle, and found painful difficulty in the matter of locomotion. Every now and then, her eyes were fastened on the little clock,—a well-meaning, correct, cheap little clock, so different from the hoary liar in the hall. How slowly the hand went! Well, anyhow, Niel would be due in ten minutes. Bryda sat opposite to her friend, on the other side of the hearthrug, crocheting a child's jersey, and discoursing on the value of "salt-lustre" china, and wondering if the Indian mail would be late, —or otherwise? The two girls were alone, as Mrs. Sinclair was upstairs nursing a bad cold.

Already the drawing-room wore an odd and unusual appearance. Beyond the radiance of soft-shaded lamps, rows of china and silver were precisely displayed on various tables; the French chairs had been drilled into a "set;" pictures and prints were arranged against the wall or in neat piles. All this gave the room something of the appearance of a bric-à-brac shop. Everything had been prepared for the impending visit of a Dublin valuator, and the subsequent scattering of these household gods!

Rhoda felt intensely happy. Her ankle was nothing—merely the result of a stupid fall from a ladder, when helping to dismantle the hall,—and of course not one of these treasures would leave Lismoyle: all would be easily arranged, as soon as her aunt

returned. At the moment she had a cable from her in her pocket. It said : " Good wishes ; leaving immediately viâ Trans-Siberian Railway. Arrive January 3rd." Her aunt would be with her within ten days—her lover within ten minutes ! He had written to her regularly, short but delightful letters, at present reposing inside the bodice of her tea-gown.

And now amidst the roaring of the wind, and the moaning of the great trees, came the sound of wheels on gravel ; the dogs sprang up barking—as was their nature to—and dashed into the hall in advance of Bryda. The door had already been opened, and Niel entered, looking cold, and careworn.

" Hallo, Bryda ! " he said, stooping to kiss her. Then his quick eye travelled round the dismantled hall.

" Yes, you see we have been very busy," she said, " collecting and arranging. Rhoda fell off the ladder—and has sprained her ankle."

" Where is she ? "

" In the drawing-room by the fire. Aunt Grace, poor dear, is in bed with a hideous cold."

Niel made no remark, but still wearing his heavy coat, entered the drawing-room, preceded by the dogs, and followed by his sister.

Rhoda was sitting up, all radiant expectation. She greeted her lover with a confident smile, but how grave he looked, as he came over, and drawing off his glove, offered her an icy cold hand.

" Sorry you're laid up like this," he said, with an air of constraint. " Have you hurt yourself ? "

"Oh, no, it's nothing—nothing at all. The old ladder collapsed. But, Niel, what has happened? Why are you so alarmingly serious? Do tell us your news!"

"I have nothing more to tell about Lismoyle, than what I wrote to you," untwisting his muffler as he spoke; "but I heard the most startling piece of information, just now coming down in the train."

As he stood there in his long coat, gravely surveying her, he looked strangely imperious and masterful: and somehow, recalled to Rhoda, the first time she had ever seen him.

"And, pray, what was the startling information?" she inquired, with a rather forced smile.

"That you are a great heiress."

She gasped audibly, but otherwise remained perfectly still, in an attitude of strained attention.

"Yes, that fellow Vydon was in the carriage with Tom Bingham and me, and one or two other men, and he made the announcement, that you have ten thousand a year. I—think—you might have let us into the secret."

"Rhoda with ten thousand a year!" screamed Bryda, and she backed two steps, and suddenly sat down.

"No, no, no," protested the heiress, speaking at last. "Only about seven thousand, when I come of age. It's all strictly tied up until then."

"Why quibble?" demanded Niel sternly.

"Quibble!" she repeated in a faint voice. "What do you mean?"

"What I say. Why have you deliberately deceived us, and acted a part, ever since you entered this house! I must say, I don't call it playing the game. I remember you told me you were fond of acting. *How* you must have enjoyed yourself!"

He looked and spoke, with such fire, and sarcasm, that she scarcely recognized him.

"Oh, Niel! How can you talk like this?" and she gave a sort of choking laugh.

"No, no," he answered. "There's an end now, to Niel and Rhoda."

When she heard this ultimatum Bryda rose and crept stealthily out of the room. Evidently there was going to be a scene—a lovers' quarrel—and she knew that her brother, when aroused, could be very rough, and outspoken. Still, Rhoda had a high spirit, was not to be easily conquered, and would probably be able to hold her own. Under the circumstances, they were best left to fight out the whole affair by themselves. And so Rhoda was enormously rich! It seemed incredible. Seven thousand a year! Why, to think of such a sum made her brain reel. And knowing that she was coming in to all this money, Rhoda had worked, and pinched, precisely the same as if she were every bit as poor as themselves! Bryda sat down at the foot of the stairs, and with her head in her hands made a serious effort to rearrange her ideas, and adjust her thoughts.

Meanwhile Rhoda was saying :

"Niel, don't, don't look at me so cruelly. Why, are you very, *very* angry?"

"I'm not exactly angry," he replied, sitting down at last, "but stunned, disillusioned, overwhelmed. I have a tremendous respect for the plain common or garden truth. I hate deception, and double-dealing. You have been here all these months, living among us in a sort of disguise, witnessing our miserable make-shifts, poverty, and struggles. Nothing was hid from you,—simply because, we naturally thought you were one of ourselves. You not only looked on, but assisted us most splendidly; and yet all the time——" and he made a violent gesture with his hand.

"Now don't say 'I was laughing in my sleeve'!" she protested with energy. "I was often far more like crying. After all, Niel, why should money make any difference between us—when we love one another? I know you love me—I have your adorable letters. Supposing it had been *my* case, and I had suddenly discovered that you were wealthy, do you think I would change? Not I; I would marry you like a shot!"

"But I don't propose to marry Miss Kyle the heiress like a shot! I absolutely refuse to live upon a woman's income," he announced, with an air of immutable determination.

"Well, you know, there is nothing so costly as pride! For my part, I'm going to throw mine overboard."

"Oh, are you?" he answered with raised brows.

"Yes, I intend to ignore snubs, and the first thing I'll do, will be to pay off the mortgage on Lismoyle."

"No, never!" he exclaimed, rising to his feet.

"But I shall," she maintained unflinchingly. "I've had a cable from Aunt Char. She will be home in ten days, and then all money matters can easily be arranged. To redeem this mortgage is my right, and duty,—since it was my nearest relative, who has helped to ruin the estate."

"You are very generous, but I will not accept one single penny. Lismoyle must go. Already I have interviewed an auctioneer; an expert is coming down to value the contents of the house to-morrow. When all is wound up, I shall take Bryda out to India and get some sort of employment there myself."

"What! and leave me behind?" she exclaimed. "Niel, you're not in earnest? You cannot give me up! At any rate, you must listen to me," and with a tremendous effort, she rose, and leaning one hand on the mantelpiece, and the other on her stick, stood erect before him.

"Don't, don't!" he expostulated. "Sit down, sit down, Rhoda; you are not fit to stand!"

She shook her head, and looking very white, and determined, said:

"You shall hear what I have to say. Grant me five minutes to explain."

"You can have the five minutes, but you can't explain—anything. Twice you have let me in. Once,

about the paying guest, now about your fortune. Do you suppose, I'll give you a third chance ? ”

“ I don't want any more chances,—but please to listen. I came here last August full of wilfulness, foolish ideas, and curiosity, and with a love of frivolity and ease. But you and Bryda have taught me a lesson of unselfishness, forbearance, and generosity. You have often made me feel ashamed, and Niel, as I have already told you, from the very hour I met you, and you were so rudely anxious to turn me out, I felt drawn to you, as I was never drawn to anyone in all my life. You could not get rid of me then ; surely you will not drive me from you now—will you ? ” she asked, with a passion of entreaty in her voice.

As she spoke, she took her hand from off the mantel-piece, and held it towards him appealingly, and he was just in time to catch her in his arms, as she fell forward in a dead faint.

CHAPTER XXX

WHEN Mrs. Donovan, with a second horse and several well-mounted guests, appeared at the first meet after the thaw, her eye travelled around the assembled crowd in search of Niel and his sister. She felt more than a little anxious with respect to her first meeting with him, since the painful scene at the "Shelbourne." Her idea that evening, had been to rush away to England, or perhaps to the South of France, and there attempt to drug or drown her disappointment ; but on cool reflection, this Spartan woman changed her mind. Naturally, a shrewd business-like individual, she realized that to desert Rahan, and leave her servants and hunters all eating their heads off, would be a foolish proceeding ; so she resolved to return home, fill the house with company, have four days' hunting a week, and lots of bridge, and endeavour to put Niel out of her thoughts. After all, not a soul knew of her little speech across the coffee table—but himself ; and if anyone was a man of honour, and a gentleman, it was Niel Conroy ! At the Meet she noticed that genial

Tom Bingham gave her a very cool nod, accompanied by a look of frigid hostility.

What was the matter with the little man, she wondered? In a jog trot from cover to cover, she ranged up alongside of him, and offered him a couple of toothsome sandwiches, which he curtly declined.

"What has become of the Lismoyle lot to-day?" she inquired, with a nervous smile.

"Oh, I expect we shall not see much of them in future. You know he's selling his hunters."

"Because the mortgage has been called in. It's a pity, isn't it?"

"A pity! It's a damned sin, and a scandal!" he corrected with emphasis.

"What do you mean, Tom?"

"I mean that it's a scandal for the holder of the mortgage to squeeze the Conroys out of their home."

"Well, I suppose the people want their capital," she suggested.

"No, there you're wrong. She doesn't."

"She!"

"Mrs. Lydia Donovan," he snapped.

"What *are* you saying?" demanded the lady, who had received a sudden and decisive shock; her face became crimson as he added:

"Oh, I know all about the whole business from find to finish. You bought up the charges eighteen months ago, and you are getting your snug five per cent. from that unfortunate fellow; and now you are

going to foreclose, and put the screw on Conroy. For real, double-dyed treachery, give me *a woman!* ”

Mrs. Donovan's complexion was now of the deepest beetroot shade: vainly, and urgently, did she gesticulate and endeavour to interrupt her companion's flow of language.

“Your lawyer's mine,” he continued. “I've had some dealings with him lately. A careless clerk enclosed me a document by mistake.—I intend to tell Niel.”

“You'd never do that!” she protested excitedly. “No, you couldn't be so base!”

“Oh, couldn't I?” he rejoined in a high, challenging voice. “It is not *I* who am base. Niel ought to know his friends from his foes. You and your sympathy with Bryda! Bah! you make me *sick*. If I only had the ready coin, I'd take up the debt myself.”

“But just listen to me for one moment,” she pleaded.

“No, let me finish. Mind you, this rascality will bring you no luck,” declaiming with his hunting-crop. “When it leaks out, as it will, that Conroy's friend, was the mortgagee, who forced him to sell and go; I give you my solemn word, of honour, that the whole country will rise against you; and even your own servants won't stay with a woman who is guilty of such a dirty trick. If they did, no one would speak to them!”

“Oh, Tom, what a savage you are!” she whimpered. “I have serious calls on my capital——”

"What's the use of your telling me these lies," he snarled.

For some moments they jogged along in dead silence. At last she blurted out :

"Well, what do you want me to do?"

"Don't ask me! Don't expect me to mix myself up in such a shameful business. I may not be much to boast of in the way of looks, or manners, but, all the same, I'm a gentleman. I don't go on the sly, and cut the ground from under my friend's feet,—and then condole, and sympathize!"

"Supposing I were to change my mind—even at the greatest inconvenience?"

"Then wire to your solicitor this very night, and tell him to withdraw. Maybe I may hold my tongue, and maybe I may *not*. Anyway, until you put all square, I will never speak to you again. That's my last word," and Tom shook up his hunter, and cantered ahead.

This was an exceedingly bitter moment for Lydia Donovan. Rejected by Niel, deserted by Tom Bingham, her mind was in a turmoil. A somewhat sluggish imagination suddenly bestirred itself, and led her to anticipate, that her guilty secret had been suspected. Was she going to be dropped by everyone? At any rate, she was riding *alone* now. Since Tom had taken his departure, not a soul had joined her—a most unusual circumstance! Her conscience clamoured insistently, and also her fears. Everyone knew, that little Bingham was a man of his word, and how fierce

and spiteful he could look ! Already he might be spreading the news. Horrible conviction !—he would, if she were not prompt. And oh, if Niel were to hear of her treachery, it would kill her ! And yet—had she not done her best for him from a worldly point of view ? How few poverty-stricken Irishmen, encumbered with debt and mortgages, would turn away from a handsome and devoted woman, with a large fortune in her own hands ? Nevertheless, the terror of Tom Bingham preyed upon her mind. She seemed to see his intent, threatening face still close at hand ; his scornful little grey eyes, and red moustache—that actually appeared to bristle, as he poured forth his railing accusation ! When the hounds were put into cover at Knockholt, the field were amazed to behold Mrs. Donovan deliberately turning away, and sending her hunter at a brisk trot in the direction of Kilbeggan.

“ What’s happened to Mrs. D. ? ” inquired Gabby Moore. “ She knows as well as anyone, that this wood is a sure find, and just crawling with foxes ! Her second horse is fresh, and yet she has never come up near the cover. There she goes, pounding along as hard as she can leg it ! It looks as if she were hurrying for the doctor.”

But Gabby’s surmise was not correct. Mrs. D. was merely riding post-haste, to Kilbeggan post-office.

CHAPTER XXXI

RHODA remained unconscious for an alarmingly long time, and in this condition was carried up to her room by Niel.—Anger and outraged pride were completely extinguished, as he lifted the light burden in his arms.

Whilst Bessie and Bryda were doing their utmost to restore her, he paced the corridor, miserably tortured by his fears, and an angry conscience, and here, he was presently joined by his sister, candle in hand.

"I'd better fetch Byrne, hadn't I?" he asked anxiously.

"No, no, no. She's just come to, and hates a fuss. Let's go into the den—it's so perishing in the passage."

As Bryda spoke, she opened the door into the apartment—which, since Doatie's departure, had been swept and garnished, and was occupied as a sitting-room by the three ladies when alone,—the drawing-room grate was so recklessly extravagant.

A few embers were still alive amid the grey ashes,

as Bryda placed her candle on the table, and, turning to confront her brother, said :

" Now, Niel, tell me what you have been saying to Rhoda ? When I first caught sight of her, I thought she was dead. You know you practically knocked her down, just the same as if you were a drunken navvy. You just bludgeoned her with your hard words and iron pride, and she, poor, unsuspecting girl, was actually counting the minutes till you returned ! "

Never in all his life had Conroy seen his sister Bryda worked up to such a pitch. Positively her eyes seemed to dart blue fire !

" You are right," he admitted. " I've been a brute ; but only think of it, Bry. All these months Rhoda has been living here in a false character. If I'd dreamt she was a great heiress, do you suppose I would have suffered her to remain a day ? "

" Possibly that was why she kept her secret so close," rejoined his sister dryly.

" Imagine a girl with thousands a year, mending, weeding, feeding chickens, and washing dogs ! "

" She only washed one dog," amended Bryda. " And I believe the thousands a year have not fallen to her yet."

" It's all the same. Her aunt gives her *carte blanche*—and she has led us to believe, that she was a poor relation."

" She never said so, in so many words," argued her champion.

"No, but she allowed it to be understood, and a lie that is half the truth, is a slippery customer."

"Rhoda meant no harm," declared Bryda stoutly. "And, after all, there was a certain amount of sense in the scheme! Supposing Madame had known of her niece's wealth? and just think of all the pleasant little friendships Rhoda would have missed! Most people, would have been too scared by her money to—what is called 'make free with her.' And I'm sure the experience, will do her good. She has lived, not with the idle rich, but the busy poor; and has been really wonderful among the cottagers. I've seen her washing children's faces and hands, making arrowroot, and roasting potatoes, and laughing and joking with them, as if to the manner born. And if we had known she was so wealthy, we should have been obliged to live up to her."

"What? Live up to seven thousand a year!" cried Niel.

"Yes. Keep a motor, refurnish her room, buy a new piano, and have more servants."

"Instead of which, she has been a lady-help without wages. Have you ever had a glimmer of the truth?"

"No-o-o," replied Bryda dubiously. "But it has struck me, that there was a considerable discrepancy between her expensive clothes, and her position as a dependent. Once I said in a playful sort of way, 'If your aunt should marry again, what would become of you, Rhoda?' And she only grew pink, and

laughed. Now, Niel, I ask—what is going to happen to her? You know, she will never care two straws for anyone but you.”

“Nor I for anyone but her. I realized that I was face to face with what is called ‘my fate,’ the very first evening she arrived. Usually it is want of money that separates people, and you know that yourself, Bry, better than most. In my case, the boot is on the other foot, and too much coin, is likely to play the very devil with *me*!”

“I see no reason for that,” said Bryda, staring over at her brother—whose face looked white in the gloom surrounding one cheap candle, which stood on the table between them,—jerking out, its last moments.

“No, don’t you? Well, *I* do,” he answered with emphasis. “An insurmountable reason. I shall be supposed to have secretly harboured and hoarded up, a great heiress, and then suddenly sprung her on my friends, as the restorer of Lismoyle. Oh, Lord! it makes me squirm, I can tell you!”

“Niel! Such talk is unworthy of you; and it’s so unlike you to put yourself *first*. Why care what people say? After all, our own grandfather was not so sensitive—otherwise, do you suppose we should still be here?”

“So then, you think I should marry Rhoda, and live on her fortune?”

“Yes, of course!” was the uncompromising reply, “unless you insist on throwing difficulties in your own way, and your pride compels you to jilt her. You

are not too proud to load a hay-cart, drive a mowing-machine, or sit down and talk to Tim or Martin; but much too proud to marry a girl who really cares for you—merely because she happens to have what you lack—and that is money!”

“Well,” rising to his feet, “I shall love Rhoda until I die—and loathe the position—until I die.”

“And there again is your pride,” declared his sister. “Why, it’s worse! It’s first cousin to personal vanity. Really, Niel, I’m rather disappointed in you.”

“If that’s the case, I’m bound to be in a bad way, Bry. Naturally my inclination is on your side—a thousand times over—but——”

“I’ll tell you something,” interrupted Bryda. “When Mrs. Kyle’s cable arrived some days ago, Rhoda said, ‘Aunt Char will soon be home, and then I shall have to confess myself.’ ‘To her?’ I asked. ‘No,’ she replied; ‘to you and Niel.’ Of course I *now* know, what she meant. I can also understand why she, who was so keen about things, took such a surprisingly lukewarm interest in our preparations for the auction. After we received your letter, we all worked hard, sorting, collecting, dusting, moving—as if our very lives depended on it. Turning out old bureaux and drawers, collecting letters and keepsakes, snuff-boxes, patch-boxes, and even pill-boxes. But, strange to say, Rhoda gave us very languid assistance—and, as a rule, just stood and looked on.”

“And yet she fell off the ladder,” said Niel; “was she looking on then?”

"No, the old steps simply collapsed as she was taking down some prints."

"Is it a bad sprain?" he asked anxiously.

"Rather. Her foot was twisted under her, and it will be some days before she can walk."

"Bryda, poor child! you look blue with cold. I'll go and make up a roaring fire in the smoking-room. We will have supper there, and I'll show you all my business papers. Oh, here is Bessie. Well, Bess?"

"Miss Kyle says she feels like dozing, and asked me to leave her, so I've just turned down the light and come away."

But the invalid was far too miserable to sleep. She lay wide awake—merely closing her eyes when a soft footfall stole across the room. Little more than a week ago, she had been engaged to Niel, and most gloriously happy. That night at dinner, her health had been toasted, and later, Bessie had come to her room with tears in her eyes, and blessed her—and she had embraced her warmly in return. And now—what a change! From sunny skies, a black, impenetrable cloud had descended on her life. If Niel held fast to his pride, continued implacable, and to resent her secrecy, in a few days' time, she must say farewell to him, and to Lismoyle, for ever.

She lay awake, hearing hour after hour struck by a wheezy old grandfather on the landing, desperately battling with this terror, until the pale light of a December morning announced itself, through chinks in the bare shutters.

CHAPTER XXXII

IN spite of her sleepless night, and throbbing ankle, Rhoda insisted on getting up, dressing, and limping into the den, where a fire had been lit, and a sofa brought forward. She was painfully anxious to see Niel, and to learn the worst at once. When, in answer to her summons, he promptly appeared, she searched his face with desperate apprehension, as she flung out a trembling hand.

"Forgive me, darling," he said, bending to kiss it, with gravest reverence, "I was a bear and a brute last night."

Rhoda's relief was so intense and unexpected, that she suddenly burst into tears, and sobbed unrestrainedly against his woolly sleeve.

"I swear I'll never, never do it again," he pleaded. "The sudden news upset my temper. Will you let me off this time?"

"Of course," she gasped, drying her eyes. "I know, Niel, that you have ever so much to forgive me. I want you to hear my confession very patiently."

And," with a watery smile she added: "Hold my hand nicely all the time."

Conroy immediately drew up a chair, prepared to accord his fullest attention; and, as requested, took her little cold hand and fondled it between his own. Then in a few rapid, illuminating sentences, Rhoda sketched out the plot that had been hatched in a London drawing-room; told of her promise to her aunt, and how that promise had galled; how latterly she had hated playing her part, and felt miserably guilty, and ashamed.

"At first, it was rather fun," she admitted, "being so readily accepted for what I pretended to be; but, later, I loathed it. I felt so deceitful, and dishonest; when people talked of trying to make both ends meet, and Aggie Blake consulted me about dyeing her hats, and turning the Rector's coats, and doing without a daily paper, I was almost ready to confess and cry; and then I was dreadfully short of money. You see, I begged for only a certain sum, and vowed that I would not accept another penny, till Aunt Char's return. I was immensely proud of managing and 'being on my own'; until suddenly I found myself left with three shillings!"

"Quite a new experience," said Niel. "Your heedless hostess had borrowed your little all."

Rhoda nodded in quick assent, and continued:

"And then one day, when I was in Cork with Bry, I sneaked into a jeweller's whilst she was in the grocer's, and I sold my two best bangles and a ring.

By bad luck, I came face to face with Mrs. Donovan. I wonder what she thought? "

"Did you? By Jove! I expect she thought you were hard up, like the rest of us. Well, we must try and recover your belongings."

"And so you are not going to turn me out, after all, Niel? "

"No—we will turn out together."

"Now that is a cruel speech! Since I am engaged to you, surely I may pay off the mortgage on my future home? Why are you so stiff-necked? "

"You must remember, that I became engaged, as I believed, to a girl without a penny,—and not to the rich Miss Kyle."

"As if that mattered! Aunt Char will be back in a few days, and then you must allow me to arrange it."

"You mean, that Mrs. Kyle will arrange it?" he corrected.

"Oh, Niel, how can you be so proud, and disagreeable? "

"Well, anyhow, the place will belong to you—not me. That shall be made clear in the settlements."

"And I can turn you out, if you don't behave yourself! No, no, Niel—Lismoyle must always be yours. I cannot allow you to transfer your burdens. And do you realize, how much we can do for others now? For instance, build and endow a village club, with books and games and an orchestra. A

cottage hospital, too, is badly wanted, and lots of things—oh, I shall have my hands full! Don't you think I shall make rather a nice Madame? "

"Adorable! Though"—then with a sudden, transforming smile—"I wonder you're not a little frightened, —after last night."

"No, I wasn't in the least afraid of you! Pray don't imagine, Niel, it was your terrible indictment that made me faint. It was my foot. I put it on the ground suddenly, and the pain was agonizing."

Here Bryda entered unceremoniously and said:

"Niel, the dog-cart has brought two men from Doonbeg. They've come from Dublin to value things."

"There will be no occasion *now*," hastily interposed Rhoda.

"No," agreed Niel. "But as all the 'things,' as you call them, are, so to speak, 'paraded,' and we have to pay for this visit, it would be rather satisfactory to know what is good, what is bad, and what is indifferent."

"Yes, a capital idea," said Rhoda; "but I shall miss the joy and delight, of going round, and listening to these experts, drinking in their words of wisdom, and hearing what is treasure-trove, and what is only fit for Mitty's jumble sale. Remember that I shall expect bulletins from time to time—say, every half-hour."

"All right," said Niel. "Then I'll just go down, and interview these fellows. I daresay they'll be

glad of some lunch, and afterwards they can make an inspection, and begin to draft the catalogue."

As soon as he had left them, Rhoda opened her arms to Bryda and announced :

"It's all right, Bry, and I believe I have to thank you !"

"Well, I *did* give him a bit of a talking to," admitted Bryda, kissing her ; "but it would have been all the same in the end. Niel is the sort, who holds on to places, and people, like grim death ; he could never endure to put you out of his life, in spite"—and she smiled—"of your great drawback !"

The valuator and his assistant were obviously disappointed, when they heard that the preparations for an auction had been suddenly abandoned. However, they were somewhat solaced by an excellent lunch, and subsequently, note-books in hand, inspected the drawing-room with the keen eyes of professional appraisers. Mr. Horn, the principal, said :

"We will just have a look round first ; go over the house to get the hang of things, and afterwards proceed to details." To which suggestion, Niel and Bryda gladly assented.

The inspection and pronouncement of the experts, were the means of dethroning various favourites, and ruthlessly shattering long-cherished beliefs. Articles, which the family had venerated, were pooh-poohed, disqualified and despised ; while others were examined, and handled, with almost reverential awe. For instance, a hideous little Chinese jar bore

a mark which stamped it as the rarest treasure in the house. Two miniatures by Le Tellier, a Boulle writing-table, and a pair of Gros-Bleu Sèvres vases (with covers complete) moved Mr. Horn and his companion to transports of admiration. Mr. Horn informed Captain Conroy that there were many bits of extraordinarily fine stuff at Lismoyle,—especially among the furniture, and china. Certainly, the pictures were disappointing; and in order to make them fit into their unworthy frames, some of the best and rarest prints, had had their margins pared away—by a careful but ignorant hand!

“I’m really sorry, sir,” said Mr. Horn to Niel, “that you have changed your plans about the sale; for I believe it would bring in a magnificent return. Indeed, I may say, extravagant prices.”

“Yes, I’m glad you think so,” said the owner.

“There have been many Irish auctions of late, and people are getting a bit fed up. Stacks of faked antiquities are on the market—we all know that! But real first-class stuff like yours, would attract buyers from London,—and even Paris. It’s extraordinary what quantities of valuable and artistic things have been stored in these old Irish houses—such numbers of French pictures, mirrors, settees, cabinets and chandeliers. Of course, in former times there was a great traffic and friendship, between Ireland and France.”

On the second day of inspection, the first floor was

visited by Mr. Horn and his assistant; and in anticipation of their visit, Bessie and two maids had been very busy sweeping and cleaning some long-disused chambers. In what was known as the "Red Room" stood a venerable mahogany four-poster, with richly-carved pillars and cornice, and faded old brocaded curtains—this had invariably been, the family death-bed.

The two experts entered, accompanied by Bryda and Mrs. Sinclair,—Bessie hovering in the background, duster in hand.

"A fine piece—a very fine piece!" remarked Mr. Horn, deliberately examining the four-poster with his keen, critical eyes. "William and Mary, I should say," and he walked round, looking it up and down. "This cornice is exceedingly good. Hullo!" he exclaimed. "There's something on the top."

"Bedad, and so there is!" corroborated Bessie, with a wave of her duster. "Holy Heaven, may I be blessed if I didn't forget all about it!"

"About what?" inquired Niel, as he entered.

"Why, about the old picture that I hid away the time the Jew man was coming round, and things were being sold off. You know, I stuck a heap of them up in the apple-garret, and I was terribly put to it, to find a place for the white lady; for Martin said that maybe, if I left her on the floor, the rats would eat the face off her! So I bethought me of this room, that's never used, and a real snug spot up on the top of the old bed,—and there's where she is

to this day. Martin and me, we put her above; she weighed a ton, and we had the divil's own work with her. I never thought of her again,—she being all by herself, and not along with the rest of the family."

"Let's have her down," said Niel. "Tell Martin to bring up the steps, and I'll lend a hand."

In a short time Martin and his master had lowered the picture, which was large, heavy, and enveloped in a very dusty sheet. When this had been cautiously removed, and the picture placed against the wall, it turned out to be a half-length portrait of a very pretty woman in a white gown; she had lovely hands and arms, and expressive, dark eyes; her powdered hair was encircled with a vivid blue ribbon; the background of the sitter was a soft, green landscape, with still softer clouds.

"I should think it was rather a good picture," said Niel, as he surveyed it. "I remember it quite well."

"Yes, and there was another smaller one in a round frame," added Bessie. "The Jew man carried her away with him, and had her snug on his knee on the car.—It seemed to me he thought a sight of her. She," indicating the recent recovery, "used to be in the drawing-room in your mother's time, Mr. Niel. But Madame took a hatred to the lady, and said she was always looking at her, and watching her, so she turned her out into the back hall. It was there I moved her from, for, knowing she came out of the drawing-room, I suspicioned she was of value."

The expert, who all this time had been submitting

the picture to a rigorous examination, wiping the canvas with a silk handkerchief, and whispering to his coadjutor, now straightened his back, and said :

"Of value ! Yes, I should think so ; it's a Romney, a remarkably fine specimen, and in wonderfully good condition."

(From which it would appear that the lady's ignominious expulsion from the drawing-room to the back hall, and subsequently to the roof of the spare bed, had done her no injury.)

"A Romney !" exclaimed Mrs. Sinclair, "a real Romney ! Why, my dear Niel, it's worth a fortune ! What do you say ? " appealing to Mr. Horn.

"It depends upon your idea of a fortune, ma'am ; but I venture to state, that this portrait will fetch from ten to twelve thousand pounds in a London salesroom ; possibly more."

Meanwhile the owner of the picture, remained awestruck, and dumb with astonishment, staring blankly at the pretty woman with the powdered hair, as if he could not believe his eyes. If the valuator was correct, this portrait of his lovely ancestress, had given him back Lismoyle !

"Will you sell it, Captain Conroy ? " inquired Mr. Horn eagerly.

"Yes, and at once," emerging from a dream, "if I can get anything like the price you named."

"I presume you will place the sale in our hands ? "

"Certainly. I will leave you to—what is called—'handle it,' and pay the usual commission."

Then he turned to hasten off, and carry the marvellous news to Rhoda, but Bryda was first; he was barely in time to hear her say, as she burst into the den:

"Oh, Rhoda, such a piece of fortune! We have just found a real Romney, the picture of some great-grandmother. The valuator says she will fetch thousands of pounds, and she's to start for London at once."

"We must bring her in for you to see," added Niel; "I'll go and get Martin to fetch her along."

"Where did you find her?" cried Rhoda. "Oh, *why* wasn't I with you?"

"Bessie had stowed her away on the top of the bed in the Red Room, and forgotten all about her," said Niel. "When she was brought down, she was recognized at once as a genuine Romney! Think of such a find—what a piece of luck!"

"Yes, your luck has come at last. Hasn't it?"

"If you ask me, I believe it came on the fourth of August."

"None of your blarney, Niel! Now, please go away and fetch the lady."

Duly dusted and made presentable, the Romney, a former Madame, was introduced to the Madame of the future. The treasure created an immense sensation. After "the white lady" had been duly admired, and examined in the den, she was carried down and placed ceremoniously in the hall; and as her stay would be so brief, all the household were invited to inspect her. Promptly they came trooping

in—including Tim from the yard, and Mary from the lodge—for the most part unconscious of the part this beautiful picture was about to play, with regard to the family fortunes.

Various indeed were the opinions of the beholders. "Sure, she's not half as handsome as Miss Bryda—no, nor even Miss Kyle!" was the verdict of Tim. "And will ye take notice of the queer, long swan neck on her," said Mary of the lodge. "She has a young face for all that grey hair; and her dress—not too old-fashioned." "An' hasn't she a roguish twinkle of her own?" said Bridget, the housemaid—who had only one eye—speaking with the air of a connoisseur; "when you look at her a good way off—she isn't too bad, entirely!"

Meanwhile, Mr. Horn and his associate stood, superior and aloof, listening to these criticisms with indulgent toleration. The picture was to be carefully packed that night; he had decided to take it to Dublin early the next day, and there confer with his principal, respecting the immediate sale of this happy find.

"You shall hear from me as soon as possible," he assured Niel, "and we will make all arrangements for having the Romney delivered in London, without any unnecessary delay.—I believe we can find you an American customer."

After the little crowd had dispersed, Niel went to talk the matter over with Rhoda, Bryda, and his aunt, who were all assembled in the den.

"Mr. Horn thinks our great-great-will

probably go to the States," he announced, as he pulled up a chair.

"And make your fortune?" said his sister. "Now we can afford to have a fire all day in the drawing-room,—and in the hall too!"

"I expect the hall chimney is full of jackdaws' nests," objected Mrs. Sinclair. "There hasn't been a fire there for twenty years."

"It never rains but it pours!" said Niel, displaying a telegram. "You'll never guess what this is? It's a wire from the solicitors, to say that the mortgagee has changed his mind, and wishes to hold on."

"No, no," cried Bryda, after a pause of amazement. "What would have been splendid news this morning—is of little importance this afternoon. It's our turn now! Great-great-grand-mamma, will pay them off. Fancy all this good luck coming together; travelling in company, the same as bad luck! I vote we keep the story of our windfall to ourselves for a few days—just let us have time to simmer down a bit!"

"The picture news may be kept dark," replied her brother, "but the other," glancing over at Rhoda, "is in the Cork Club by now! Tom Bingham was in the same carriage as Vydon; and I think that tells *all*."

"Yes; and what did Tom say?" inquired Bryda eagerly.

"He said" (mimicking Tom), "'Ah, now why didn't I know this before?'"

Rhoda gave a delighted laugh and clapped her hands.

"If my news is all over the country, I shall be afraid to face the neighbours. They will think me such a—what shall I say?"

"A gay deceiver?" suggested Mrs. Sinclair.

"No, an impostor. I shall remain hidden away in this room, long after my ankle is better."

"You will do nothing of the sort," declared Niel.

"You look as pale as a ghost! As soon as you can hobble, I shall take you out in the tub; and if you don't want to be recognized—you may wear a pair of motor goggles."

CHAPTER XXXIII

BETWEEN the recovery of the Romney and Christmas, only a few days intervened, and these were filled with extraordinary preparations. There were hasty expeditions to Cork, and telegrams to Dublin; provisions and presents were purchased, coal, beef, and blankets distributed with no niggard hand; the interior of Lismoyle glowed with fine fires and holly-berries, and in short the old house had not known such a merry, bustling time, for more than twenty years.

The news of Miss Kyle's engagement and fortune became (as she had feared) a general topic. The neighbours, when they met, rushed at one another with the questions, "Have you heard? And is it true?" "Why have they all kept it so dark?" "I wouldn't have believed that Niel Conroy had it in him, to be so sly!" said Gabby Moore, with an air of indignant resentment.

But Rhoda allowed it to be widely known (and through this same lady) that Niel had never been in the secret, as far as her fortune was con-

cerned—and, indeed, she found an able corroborator in Tom Bingham; for if, as he said, a man knew that he was about to marry an heiress, he would not be at his wit's end, to raise a few thousands to pay off his mortgages!

The amount of Miss Kyle's fortune increased like the traditional snowball. By the time its existence was public property, it had leaped from thousands to hundreds of thousands; and finally settled down very comfortably into millions.

The Sunday after Christmas Day, Mrs. Donovan walked over from Rahan to offer her congratulations to the happy pair. She found them in the avenue, with Gabby and Mitty Moore,—whose incessant flow of talk, considerably mitigated the awkwardness of this somewhat embarrassing meeting. Mrs. Donovan behaved with remarkable liberality in the way of congratulations and good wishes; though she addressed herself chiefly to Rhoda, and steadily avoided meeting Conroy's eyes.

Lyddy Donovan had a hard head; a thick skin (under which was embedded a good heart); an irresistibly strong will; and boundless ambition. It was this will, that had compelled her to turn away from her first lover—a handsome, penniless stock-rider—and marry the wealthy, but ill-favoured Donovan. This same force supported her now, assisted her to strangle her feelings, and put a bold face on the situation. She was putting a *very* bold face on the situation, as she marched up Lismoyle avenue between

Gabby and Rhoda, discoursing in a loud and far-reaching voice of the munificent treat she was preparing for her workmen. How strange and unnatural, it seemed, to find the hall door at Lismoyle shut fast! and to be obliged to ring and wait in the ordinary way,—but winter blasts, were altogether too penetrating, even for that easy-going establishment. Seated in the drawing-room, Mrs. Donovan removed her furs and gloves, out-talked Gabby, and remained to tea; where she did ample justice to Lismoyle's famous potato-cakes.

When the meal was over (it *was* a meal) and the Moores had taken their departure, Mrs. Donovan commanded Niel to escort her home (her excuse being that there was said to be a cross cow about the road). And this command,—whatever Conroy's true feelings might be,—he obeyed with chivalrous alacrity.

It was a lovely night. The moon was shining down with silver intensity, as Rhoda watched the pair—Lyddy all sables, and solidity, Niel so alert and soldierly—disappear together round the bend of the avenue. She wondered rather anxiously what Lyddy would say to her escort? subsequently she even threw out subtle, and delicate feelers, to her fiancé. But with respect to the topic those two discussed on that moonlight walk, her curiosity was never gratified.

CHAPTER XXXIV AND LAST

IT really seemed, as if in the matter of news, the neighbourhood (like the curiosity shops)—was overstocked with material, nearly all provided by the dull, the all but derelict, Lismoyle. First, there had been the amazing tidings of Miss Kyle's fortune—surely a sufficient provision for a nine-days' wonder; but long before the nine days had elapsed, came the intelligence of her engagement to Niel. On the top of this fell, so to speak,—the astounding discovery of the Romney—the whereabouts of the find, was described as being in so many places, varying from behind the kitchen dresser, to the inside of a mattress, that finally one picture was multiplied to *three*!

Lastly appeared the announcement of Madame's marriage; this was published among fashionable paragraphs, as follows:

"On the 17th inst., very quietly, at St. Anne's Church, Dublin, Kathleen, youngest daughter of the late Blake Lynch, Esq., J.P., D.L., of Capp-a-

more Castle, County Mayo, and widow of the late Captain Sangster, First Blue Moons, and also of the late Denis Conroy, Esq., of Lismoyle Castle ; to Peter Brander, of Sharne House, County Tipperary, and Buenos Ayres."

Mrs. Kyle and party arrived home early in January, and she travelled straight over to Lismoyle, where already the evidence of money was apparent in various ways. For instance, there was a motor (hired), new bedroom carpets, and new lamps ; bells, window-cords, and door-handles, had all been satisfactorily replaced.

Mrs. Kyle had a very different journey, and reception from her niece. She made no détours, but came direct to Doonbeg, where she was met by Niel and Rhoda with the car. A cart brought her luggage ; two men received her in the hall—Martin and a satellite—and the whole house was warm and well-lighted. The new arrival was enraptured with Lismoyle, its treasures, and, above all, with its master. When she had known him two or three days, she imparted her opinion to Rhoda :

" Well, indeed, dear child, I must confess that I think you have waited to some purpose ; and if I were only twenty years younger, I would cut you out, and marry Niel myself ! "

Mrs. Kyle stayed for more than a week ; during which time, she lived in a perpetual whirl of gaiety. There were bridge parties, luncheons, dinners, meets

of the hounds; and she playfully upbraided her niece for deluding her with the intelligence, that the neighbourhood was *quiet*.

"My dear, I don't know when I've been among such a lively set of people! Now I can well understand why, for more reasons than one,—you stuck to the place like the proverbial limpet."

Before the end of Mrs. Kyle's visit Mr. and Mrs. Brander came down to Marshlands, to take leave of their friends, previous to starting for South America. The bride, wearing lovely furs, frocks, pearls and hats, looked more radiantly pretty than ever. She and her proud bridegroom came over to dine and sleep; Mrs. Brander appeared still to look on Lismoyle as her home, and did the honours as of yore. Being taken in to dinner in full bridal ceremony, on the arm of her step-son,—with a gay remark she suddenly released herself, and swept into her former place,—thereby upsetting all Bryda's anxious and careful arrangements of table, and guests. These numbered fourteen, and included Tom Bingham, the Blakes, Captain Craven, the M.F.H., his wife, his brother, and Mitty Moore.

The *ci-devant* hostess proceeded to make everyone pleased with themselves and their neighbours: she chattered and laughed incessantly, and produced a capital budget of brand-new stories. Mrs. Kyle gazed at her in wide-eyed amazement; she was not only amused, but dazzled! In all her travels, and her many and varied experiences, she had never

encountered anyone like Mrs. Brander. Once more in the drawing-room, seated in a low chair before a blazing log-fire, her fashionably tight satin skirt, displaying her pretty crossed feet, the bride disclosed, an exuberant and expansive mood. She looked about, noting the tall standard lamps with elaborate floral shades, the hothouse flowers, palms, and gay, brocaded cushions.

"It's a dear old place, isn't it?" she said, addressing Mrs. Kyle. "It always had such possibilities. I am really sorry to desert it; the only thing it wanted, was money."

Rich Mrs. Kyle—herself a combination of Doucet and diamonds—smiled, all attention.

"And fancy my sly little niece having such a fortune," waving her fan at Rhoda, "and never letting on! but sitting up in my room, mending stockings, and doing ladies'-maid, just as if she were a poor relation. If I had guessed at the truth, wouldn't I have plunged my hand in her pocket—yes, up to the elbow!"

"And where is your own girl, Miss Sangster?" inquired Mrs. Kyle sympathetically.

"Oh, Doatie is staying near Newbridge, enjoying the time of her life. Now that she can have lots of dancing, new frocks, and excitement, she will improve. It never suited Doatie to be poor, and I must confess, between ourselves"—glancing round her circle—"that the dear child was more of a discipline, than a daughter! I shall take her out, and marry

her in the Argentine—no poor army officers for Doatie; an enormously rich man is *my* idea."

"And what about Doatie?" inquired Miss Moore.

"My darling Mitty, you know she never had many ideas, not like *you*; she only cares for frocks and balls, and flying about. Talking of flying, Rhoda, you and Niel, must come and stay with us; you too, Mrs. Kyle. I know you are a wonderful traveller. We shall be delighted to have you, and any friends you like to bring out with you."

"You are too kind, but I've just had five months of sight-seeing,—and now I must settle down."

"That's a thing I shall never be able to do! Pedro has promised to bring me home every year, and I shall have crowds of visitors out to stay with us. Pedro is such a dear—he adores me! How often have I sat in this very room—yes, and this very chair—eating my heart out with a longing for things, such as money, travelling, pleasure,—and now,"—suddenly rapping the palm of one hand with her fan, "I've got everything! My prince says, he is not a racing or gambling man, has no expensive tastes. *I'm* his expensive taste; his one extravagance! Isn't it," looking over at Mitty and Bryda, "nice to be *me*?"

"Yes, if you take for granted, that it's nice to be a rich woman, who never thinks of anyone in the world but herself," replied Mitty, with a challenge in her eye.

"Now, now, Mitty dear, don't be so cross.

Remember all my beautiful donations for your rummage sales ! ”

“ Dirty ball-dresses,” muttered Mitty under her breath.

“ And I’m not the *only* woman with money. What about Rhoda ? ”

“ Oh, Rhoda has her plans,” asserted Mrs. Kyle, “ and hopes to do a good deal for this neighbourhood—and Niel too.”

“ He’s such a close-fisted fellow ! ” objected his ungrateful step-mother, “ and so silly about money. He always insisted on paying the dog-tax, and the county cess, and yet wouldn’t spare a penny for a new croquet-set. By the way, talking of croquet, how is Lyddy ? ” And as she looked at Rhoda, her eyes sparkled with eager curiosity.

“ Oh, she’s quite well, thank you,” replied Rhoda composedly. “ She lunched here last Tuesday.”

“ Nonsense ! ” Then, after a long pause,—heavily weighted with incredulity—“ Well, well, well ! Tommy will have it all his own way, now. Especially since his niece is engaged to an earl. Tommy has always kept his grand relations very dark—just as if he was ashamed of them. But when Lyddy is Mrs. Bingham, she will see, that they are trotted out ! And what are *your* plans, darling ? ” inquired her aunt, turning to Rhoda.

“ Oh, Niel and I, are taking Bryda to India in February.”

“ What ! And leaving the place all to itself ? ”

Don't you think that will be very foolish?" (Surely a remarkable speech for a woman who had abandoned Lismoyle, not merely for months, but years.)

"Aunt Grace will stay here, and have a friend to keep her company."

"Not to speak of the dear dogs," added Mrs. Sinclair. "Bessie will run the house, Tim will manage the stables, and Tom Bingham has promised to keep an eye on the place."

"Ah! One eye here, and the other on Rahan," said Mrs. Brander. "What a squint it will give him! I shouldn't be a bit surprised, if they had a wedding there immediately. These things are contagious; and, anyway, I've taken the bush out of the gap in this part of the world! You'll be the next, Rhoda," nodding at her niece.

"I suppose so," she assented, with a vivid blush.

"Don't be so vague, child," protested Mrs. Kyle. Then turning to Mrs. Brander, she added: "The invitation cards are being printed, and I hope to have a great gathering of all our friends. I shall be really sorry to tear myself away from Lismoyle, but Rhoda and I must start on Monday, to see about the trousseau."

"And *how* I should love to go and help you!" declared Madame Butterfly. "Rhoda knows, I have wonderful taste, and where money is no object, I am just in my element. But there's no use in talking—our boat leaves on Tuesday, so I miss the grand wedding, choral service, floral church, pages, and

bridesmaids. Don't have a bouquet, Rhoda, whatever you do. It's such a bother! I speak from experience—I've had three! Ah!" giving her skirt a hasty twitch, and fingering her pearls, "here come the men!"

THE END

